

Police get lessons in why they serve

Jenna Pizzi and Esteban Parra, The News Journal 8:29 p.m. EDT October 16, 2015



Wilmington police take part in a new training called Blue Courage, an initiative focused on the human development of a police officer.



(Photo: JENNIFER CORBETT/THE NEWS JOURNAL)

In an atmosphere where police officers are scrutinized by their supervisors, the media and the growing number of citizens armed with cell phone videos, it can be a frustrating, thankless job.

"Policing right now is probably the hardest it has ever been," said Tom Verni, a retired New York City Police officer and trainer for Blue Courage, a program that reinvigorates officers' commitment to policing and reminds them of the nobility of their profession.

Verni, along with Noble Wray and Daniel Schmer, spent part of this week training 41 Wilmington officers on techniques to help them be better cops. Blue Courage is a curriculum that aims to teach de-escalation skills such as stress management, increasing engagement and fighting cynicism. All Wilmington police officers will be trained in the program by early next year.

Blue Courage is paid for by a federal initiative called the Violence Reduction Network, but officials declined to provide a specific cost.

Wilmington Police Chief Bobby Cummings and his senior staff were first to take Blue Courage. While the program is not specifically community police training, Cummings said it impacts what officers do in the community.

"It made you evaluate yourself," Cummings said. "Where you are in your career and how it impacts how you deal with your community."

He said he hopes it reminds participants why they wanted to be a cop – to help others.

"Our officers are here to serve," he said. "And we are trying to remind them, again, why they said they came here."

Several who took the two-day course this week were receptive to it.

"Everyone needs a refresher on why they joined the police department," said Wilmington police Master Cpl. Doug Baylor, a 29-year veteran. But in addition to a refresher, Baylor said the course gives him a view into how his coworkers think.

"It's always good having open discussions about sensitive things," he said. "There are some police officers, and some people in the community, who don't want to touch sensitive issues because they might be labeled as racists or prejudiced or something like that. And I think it's good when people talk."

Residents of Wilmington's neighborhoods plagued by violence [told The News Journal \(/longform/news/local/2015/10/02/city-residents-say-rift-police-growing-worse/73241752/\)](http://www.delawarenewsjournal.com/story/news/local/2015/10/02/city-residents-say-rift-police-growing-worse/73241752/) they do not feel they are treated fairly by police or given respect when they are approached in their neighborhoods. Some said they fear violence could erupt if a large crowd forms at a crime scene or against officers, like has occurred in other places in the country when residents protested police action.

Instances of violence by police against minority citizens have caused backlash in Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore, South Carolina and New York City. In Baltimore and Ferguson, protests turned to riots.

To restore their relationship with the community, many departments have turned to training programs like Blue Courage.

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Cpl. Andrew Conine with the Wilmington Police Department K-9 unit participates in new training called Blue Courage, an initiative focused on the human development of a police officer. (Photo: JENNIFER CORBETT/THE NEWS JOURNAL)

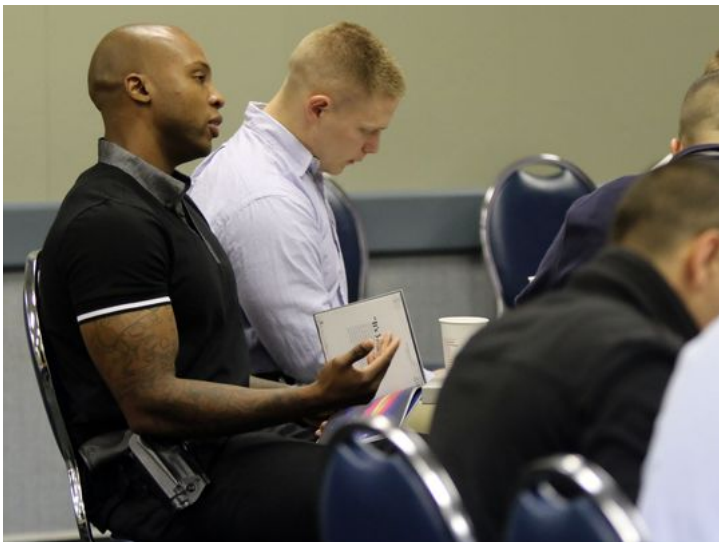
Blue Courage was developed by Michael Nila, a former Aurora, Illinois, police commander with support from the U.S. Justice Department. The curriculum can be holistic, teaching officers about total health and well-being "to act with practical wisdom, to exude vitality, and to hearten human connections." There's even a segment in which officers are taught about breathing in order to reduce stress and focus on the situation at hand.

The Blue Courage training was specifically suggested in the Wilmington Public Safety and Strategies report, commissioned by Gov. Jack Markell and the state Legislature after a sharp increase in violence in Wilmington earlier this year. The commission brought together community leaders, state officials and policing experts to recommend ways to improve the Wilmington Police Department.

Having officers take care of themselves so they can take care of the community they are sworn to protect is an important part of the course, said Schmer, a Blue Courage master instructor.

"If we are sending people out there that are not healthy, then how can we expect them to police their communities in a healthy fashion," he asked. "It's really about taking care of the men and women who are in this room."

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Officer Springeral Dmeza with the Wilmington Police Department participates in new training called Blue Courage, an initiative focused on the human development of a police officer. (Photo: JENNIFER CORBETT/THE NEWS JOURNAL)

Blue Courage also tries to have officers put themselves in the shoes of others in order to see "respect differently," Schmer said.

"For a long time we've talked about people having to earn our respect," he said. "And we're talking about now giving respect, ... and just giving people the respect that every human being is entitled to."

That can be challenging at times, especially when dealing with certain criminals, he said. "But is there a human being inside of that deserves the human dignity that all people deserve?"

"I think we all see that the answer for that is 'Yes there is.' "

The Justice Department has spent more than \$1.5 million on Blue Courage, which has been introduced at police departments across the country and it was first used in 2013 at Arizona's largest police academy, according to the Associated Press.

"It struck a chord," Lyle Mann, executive director of the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board, told the AP. "There was this feeling that the militarization, the focus on officer safety, this whole confrontational kind of thing was morphing in a way that didn't feel good to those progressive chiefs."

University of Delaware officers went through the program this summer.

UD Police Chief Patrick Ogden hosted the training not only for his officers, but officers from different police departments throughout the state including Dover, Newark and state police.

"It was very well received for its leadership and ethics," Ogden said. "A lot of it is changing the police culture as we know it."

The culture must change because there is a divide between some members of society and police, he said.

For his 50 officers, Ogden said it is important to understand the divide because students come to the university from all over the country with their own opinions or experiences about police.

"A lot of the class is about changing that culture through reflection and education," he said.

In the beginning of the training, Ogden said the younger officers embrace the change while older officers show some resistance.

"But once they get in there and start the process you can really see the light bulb," Ogden said.

He said it is hard to see the impact of the training on a day-to-day basis, but what matters is that they have taken the time to learn and consider the approach when out in the community.

Long-time Wilmington police officer Master Sgt. Leon Stevenson who completed the training this week said the lessons could benefit the community at large.

"I think the community, the media, all of them should be doing it at the same time," Stevenson said. That's because Stevenson, a 33-year veteran, sees a lack of communication between these groups. "We should all be on the same page."

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