

“Do not let lethal force be the means by which you de-escalate the situation”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing December 1, 2020

 *Latest in series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

Gadfly ever alert to sources that help him think about policing in the wake of the George Floyd murder. This article thoughtful about a certain officer training program and the wider need for a culture change.

Selections from William Bender, “Can Philadelphia transform its police force from ‘warriors’ to ‘guardians’?” Philadelphia Inquirer, November 29, 2020. (Reprinted in the Morning Call, November 30)

On a mild November night in 2015, Camden police sped to Crown Fried Chicken at Broadway and Mickle, where a distraught man with a knife had just threatened to kill a customer inside.

When cops arrived, the 48-year-old man was outside, waving the knife, clearly a potential threat. Repeatedly, he refused police orders to drop his weapon.

The encounter could have been his death sentence in many cities in America — or, a few years earlier, in Camden itself.

Instead, police officers recognized the man was in the throes of a mental health crisis and backed off. An officer with a Taser, well over an arm’s length away, walked with him for several blocks, trying to break through to the agitated man, all of it captured on video.

The officer fired his Taser, which didn't incapacitate the man, but he eventually dropped his knife and was taken into custody. No shots were fired.

Five years later, in similar circumstances in West Philadelphia, Walter Wallace Jr., a 27-year-old father of nine with a history of mental illness, emerged from his family's home holding a knife after police received a call that he was threatening his parents.

This time, two police officers, only a few years from the training academy, pulled their guns, shouted orders, and 41 seconds later fired 14 shots, killing Wallace.

"I understand he had a knife, and their job is to protect and serve," Anthony Fitzhugh, a cousin of Wallace, said the day after the shooting. "By all means do so, but do not let lethal force be the means by which you de-escalate the situation."

Investigators here may conclude that the officers followed their training and were justified in opening fire on Wallace.

But the Oct. 26 incident, which led to widespread protests and unrest, may result in the Philadelphia Police Department reintroducing more extensive de-escalation training — similar to what had been in place more than decade ago but was quietly discontinued.

Camden and more than 80 other police departments around the country use a version of the training known as ICAT (Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics), and the results are promising. Developed by the Police Executive Research Forum, its techniques are designed for scenarios in which a person is armed with a weapon other than a gun, particularly those involving people in crisis or attempting "suicide by cop."

ICAT teaches officers to create space, taking cover behind their squad cars or other barriers if possible, and buying time. Ideally, one officer takes the lead in speaking with a subject and uses open-ended questions — rather than multiple officers yelling commands down the barrel of their guns.

Wexler said. “In America, we train them that if someone has a knife, pull out a gun and bark orders.”

For someone with mental illness, Wexler said, “that might be the worst thing you can do.”

ICAT and other forms of de-escalation training have won over skeptics who initially were concerned that a less aggressive police response would put officers in harm’s way.

“You have to be open-minded as an officer,” said Camden Police Chief Joseph Wsocki. “Policing has to evolve. ICAT is the next generation of training. It works and it keeps everyone safe — the officers and the citizens we encounter.”

Capt. Kevin Lutz, who oversees Camden’s ICAT training, said officers need to recognize — and avoid — “officer-created jeopardy” situations, when officers place themselves in danger unnecessarily and increase the likelihood of using lethal force.

Training, of course, can go only so far.

In Philadelphia, modern de-escalation tactics will need to be accompanied by a culture change throughout the rank and file, a shift from a “warrior” to a “guardian” mentality of policing, like what has taken place just across the river in Camden, to some national acclaim.

Councilmember Jamie Gauthier, whose district includes the West Philadelphia neighborhood where Wallace was killed, said the initial response from the Fraternal Order of Police was not encouraging.

“Stuff like that is not helpful,” Gauthier said. “There’s training, but there’s also a culture that really needs to be changed.”

“I’m intrigued by it,” she said, “because it is a training that emphasizes the sanctity of life for everyone involved.”

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