

# Forensic Mental Health Insider

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## Then and Now – Police Academy Training: A Decade of Change

**Drew Moldenhauer, MS**

"Drop the knife! Drop the knife! Drop the knife!" Bang! Bang! Bang! This sounds all too familiar to me; sadly, this abrupt approach is how we were trained to deal with suspects holding a knife in the police academy well over a decade ago. There was no discussion or verbal de-escalation; the situation prompted us to draw our service weapon, point, and pull the trigger. Training in understanding the complexity of mental health and crisis response has driven a different reaction in these situations over the last decade for the better. Now officers are exposed to more verbal de-escalation training and handling calls with people suffering from a mental illness, both at the academy and in-service training. Minnesota Police Training is standardized, governed through the MN Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Licensing Board; however, across the United States, Police academy *training is not* standardized.

As a veteran police officer, working patrol in two different cities, I currently hold a part-time law enforcement position; my experience has drawn me to teaching Law Enforcement at Secondary Technical Education Program (STEP) in Anoka, MN.

In the mid-2000s, I attended Hibbing MN Police Academy learning how to become a police officer. Some of the variables we learned throughout the academy were informative and relevant for the time, preparing me for the road ahead; however, in hindsight, elements were missing. Some of the foundational learning included firearms training, emergency vehicle operations, and use of force training.

The Hibbing Police Academy instructors were very experienced in explaining these tactics, policies, and procedures to us students, providing us with hours of hands-on training experience. Again, in hindsight, many situational and response elements should have been covered in the academy that was not.

Sadly, this lack of training in situational response preempted some mistakes on the job, which forced me to learn, adjust my approach, and seek additional human service understanding that was not initially covered in the academy. An example of this included responding to a very common call involving a civil dispute. People not getting along frequently, exhibiting emotionally driven behavior and responses. Early in my career, I recollect responding several times just having to make a decision, not knowing if it was right or wrong, and having to go with the consequences as they were laid out. This was the case in many civil disputes because we were not adequately trained in conflict management, mediation, or handling emotionally driven behavioral responses. In the past, the academy did not prepare us on ways to de-escalate people during a crisis or learn how to control the intensity of people with mental health issues.

In my humble and experiential opinion, communication is one of the most imperative parts of police work today. We had to learn boots on the ground, real-time by way of trial and error,

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enhancing our communicative de-escalation skillsets in these sometimes volatile situations on-the-fly. Even in today's world, many senior and veteran police officers do not want to attend training in dealing with the mentally ill, for many reasons, including the unknown element of surprise, stigma, society perception, and administrative support. My experience informs the need for improvement, funding, availability, accountability, and attendance of police officers' mandatory training in de-escalation to sharpen their skills in serving those in crisis within our communities. There are many dynamic calls police respond to; they need the best training possible to handle these situations.

As an adjunct professor at one of MN's esteemed police academies, I am fulfilling my passion for working with students enrolled in the police academy. These students are enthusiastic about becoming police officers, even in these unruly times focused on law enforcement, yet still exceedingly passionate about serving their future communities. Teaching police response skillsets in approach, observation, communication, and strategies to effectively handle mental illness and in-progress crimes have proven rewarding. Students are afforded the opportunity to bridge physical and psychological health context with behavior response and communicative techniques to best respond to an individual facing a crisis.

Over the past decades, we are experiencing a reform in educating police officers, arming them with human service skillsets. My goal is to passionately take time teaching the next generation of police officers' skills in crisis management, mediation, and techniques involving verbal de-escalation and strategy management to avoid the cyclical involvement within criminal justice systems. Our collaborative teaching approach is to share candid examples and mistakes of the past and inform students of exemplary communicative, safe techniques and strategies to navigate crisis and handle in-progress crimes.

I even have incorporated a civil dispute scenario based on real-life events, exploring strategic options. In my opinion, police academies are intentionally changing with the times, which is great to see. Recruits and veteran police officers need as much de-escalation training as possible. Along with my esteemed colleagues, I take a lot of pride in teaching the next generation of police officers.

### **About the Author:**

Drew is a full time Law Enforcement Teacher at STEP High School in Anoka, MN. Drew comes to Concordia-St. Paul with 12 years' experience as a full time Police Officer with the City of Ramsey. While at the City of Ramsey he was an; Active Shooter Instructor, Use of Force Instructor, Field Training Officer, CIT Instructor and Peer Support Counselor. Along with his full-time teaching duties, he currently works part time as a Police Officer with the City of Osseo, is an Instructor for the police academy at Hennepin Technical College and is a CIT instructor for the Barbara Schneider Foundation. Drew was born and raised in Anoka, MN and went to Southwest Minnesota State University where he received his Bachelor's Degree of Science in Justice Administration. He furthered his education at St Cloud State University where he received his Master's in Public Safety Executive Leadership. In his not so free time, Drew enjoys spending time with his wife Amanda and two Labrador retrievers. He is also an avid fisherman and loves spending time out on the water.