

Bristol County Sheriff's holds first class dealing with mental illness training, implicit bias, deescalation

"There are many different ways to solve a problem, or in the case of the next generation of Bristol County Corrections Officers, many ways to deescalate a situation.

Deescalation is one of the main focuses of the expanded training academy for CO recruits at the Bristol County Sheriff's Office this week with classes on duty to intervene, implicit bias, dealing with mental illness, and deescalation.

"The biggest takeaway was that not everyone reacts the same," said Haeley Burchell, cadet class president. "We all have different backgrounds, all have different triggers, and different stressors. Understanding these differences is very important to being a corrections officer."

The current class of 22 cadets is the first BCSO academy to expand from eight weeks to nine, and included the 15 hours of additional training on deescalation, duty to intervene, implicit bias, and dealing with mental illness. Previously, all topics were covered in various classes but not focused on with their own sessions.

"Everything changed in law enforcement after the George Floyd tragedy," Sheriff Paul Heroux said. "We need to be more professional and better trained. Previously, COs were told of their obligation to do these things and to be mindful, but COs were not given the techniques or role-play scenarios to live those de-escalation tactics."

Instructors from Commonwealth Police Legacy spent two days at

the BCSO training academy this week giving 15 hours of training across the four new classes. All instruction featured scenario-based exercises geared to a corrections setting.

“One of the first things the instructor did was come to us and ask us different situations that we’ve seen inside the jail,” BCSO Training Director Lt. Robert Matos said. “They used real-life scenarios. There was a lot of good information in these sessions and I have no doubt our officers will be better for it.”

All training academies for CO recruits will include the new classes going forward, and Lt. Matos added that the lessons learned will be more incorporated into the regular annual in-service training for all security staff.

In addition to the new classes, training hours were added to the academy in defensive tactics, report writing, suicide trauma awareness and physical fitness. The new officers are scheduled to graduate on June 21.

Brittany Correia, platoon leader for the cadet class, said the recruits took a lot out of the new sessions.

“This can be used not just behind the wall (of a jail), but out in the public as well,” she said. “At home, anywhere there’s an argument or frustration. It opened a lot of eyes.”

Investment in skills training is nothing new for Sheriff Heroux, who not only campaigned on increasing deescalation and other tactics, but tripled the police training budget during his time as Mayor of Attleboro.

“This is what we need to do to make sure COs are prepared to resolve complex situations with inmates,” he said. “These are the tools they need to do their jobs better and keep themselves and the people in their care and custody as safe as possible.”-Bristol County Sheriff’s Office.