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Lewiston-Auburn

Police, youth take part in 'Policing the Teen Brain' training

By Staff report

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LEWISTON — We've all seen the scenario more times than we can count. It's the middle of the day and a group of teenagers is hanging around the park, playing music at full blast. It's not just loud — the music is also vulgar. Complaints are made and the police are sent to take care of the situation.

Today, though, it's a little different. Today, the rowdy kids are actually police officers. The "cops" who are sent to investigate the complaint are actually local teens.

It's a classic case of role reversal and it's meant to teach both sides of the issue a set of lessons.

"This gives us a different view of things," Lewiston Police Sgt. Roger Landry said. "So that when we're dealing with youths, we can see things as they do and maybe do things differently."

All week, police and officials from juvenile probation have gathered in Lewiston for "Policing the Teen Brain" training. The idea is to improve interaction between police officers and the youths they deal with daily.

The training covers many components of law enforcement. In one session, the officers are asked to consider different scenarios, some of which read like the scripts of the TV show "Breaking Bad."

In one such scenario, a 17-year-old boy plans a murder with a pair of his friends. They will ultimately kidnap a woman, bind her with duct tape and toss her off a bridge, killing her.

In another scenario, a pair of teens are accused of home break-ins and, when they show up to school with a stolen camera, the questioning begins.

The scenarios are based on U.S. Supreme Court cases, according to W. David Walker, training director with the national nonprofit group Strategies for Youth. The local police officers, not knowing the outcomes of those court cases, are asked to consider the scenarios from their perspective as cops. The idea is to get the

men and women of law enforcement to ponder elements such as the emotional maturity of teen suspects and a young person's grasp of the law.

The training program was brought to Lewiston by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Group.

"Through it, we hope to offer officers new skills in interacting with youth and to strengthen Lewiston Police Department's relationships with youth-serving community organizations," Lewiston Police Chief Michael Bussiere said.

The goal is to help cops build relationships with youth, identify alternatives to arrest and to socialize youth to the rules of their community and to the role of police authority in their lives.

For police, much of the training involves standard classroom work, yet they are also exposed to more interactive methods. In one exercise, two local teenage girls and a 16-year-old boy were first asked to play ordinary kids hanging around the doors of a downtown business.

When the police arrive, they immediately begin to yell, as they were instructed to do. The scene turns into a loud confrontation and not much is accomplished.

"I was scared," one of the teenage girls confessed later.

"I didn't even want to deal with them," the 16-year-old boy said.

For the next approach, police try a different tactic. They quietly introduce themselves to the kids. They explain the reason for the complaint and ask the teens to move along.

The situation resolves itself in a matter of seconds.

When the roles are reversed, the teens, shouting commands from the start of the confrontation, got to view the scenario from the police officer's perspective.

All they got was lip and stubbornness from the teens.

"Did it work to yell at them?" Walker asked them. "It didn't work, did it?"

The officers were introduced to the concept of "restorative justice," where alternative means of conflict resolution sometimes work better than an arrest.

"We know that children who are detained are more likely to be removed from the community long-term," said Nate Gagnon, Juvenile Justice Advisory Group's correctional compliance monitor. "This not only disrupts their connections to schools, services and family; it also has lasting impacts on both educational and employment levels."



Nate Gagnon, left, of the Maine Department of Corrections, Cpl. Matt Vierling of the Lewiston Police Department and Lewiston Community Resource Officer Joe Philippon pretend to shoot video of three youths in a role-playing skit during Policing the Teen Brain training at the Lewiston police station on Thursday. Officers played the parts of youths playing their music too loud. When the "police" (youths) told them to turn down their music, the "youths" (police officers) pulled out their cellphones to make a YouTube video, a common occurrence that police face in today's cellphone-centric society.

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Lewiston Community Resource Officer Joe Philippon, left, Juvenile Community Corrections Officer Tara Ennis and Cpl. Eugene Kavanagh of the Lewiston Police Department approach youth in Kennedy Park near curfew during a role-playing skit during Policing the Teen Brain training at the Lewiston police station on Thursday. Officers approached the youth in a polite, peaceful way as opposed to a loud, abrupt approach to see if it made any difference in youth-police relations.

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Detective Corey Jacques, center, of the Lewiston Police Department listens with others to a presentation on strategies for dealing with youth at the Policing the Teen Brain training at the police station on Thursday.

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School Resource Officer Craig Johnson of the Lewiston Police Department listens to Chesari Tempesta of the Restorative Justice Institute of Maine make her presentation during Policing the Teen Brain training at the police station on Thursday.

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