

From Theory to Practice: Seattle Police Department's Approach to De-escalation



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The Seattle, Washington, Police Department (SPD) began formally incorporating de-escalation principles as a fundamental part of training in 2014. The idea of actively teaching and implementing de-escalation was originally born out of the SPD crisis intervention team (CIT) training. After the first CIT training cycle was completed and had been evaluated, SPD determined that crisis intervention should be viewed as just one pillar of an overall de-escalation strategy. The need to deliver specific de-escalation training was identified and implemented for all sworn members of the SPD in 2015. The training was delivered as a four-hour scenario-based block, focused on defining what de-escalation is (and is not) and how to apply it in a variety of calls for service.

The SPD formalized its expectations regarding de-escalation in 2015, as part of the agency's overarching use-of-force policy. The policy states,

De-escalation tactics and techniques are actions used by officers, when safe and without compromising law enforcement priorities, that seek to minimize the likelihood of the need to use force during an incident and increase the likelihood of voluntary compliance.

*When safe and feasible under the totality of the circumstances, officers shall attempt to slow down or stabilize the situation so that more time, options and resources are available for incident resolution.**

When de-escalation concepts were originally introduced during training, officers' feedback centered around officer safety and the need to immediately respond to dynamic and rapidly evolving situations—in other words, consistent with policy, it was essential that officers did not misconstrue de-escalation as compromising officer safety. Time was spent focusing on the relevant definitions and outlining exactly what the expectations were, in conjunction with reality-based training scenarios, which allowed SPD officers to gain awareness and practical application of de-escalation techniques for a better understanding. Also included in the training were scenarios where de-escalation

was feasible and when de-escalation was not feasible.

SPD's de-escalation and CIT training has continued to evolve into higher-intensity scenarios that focus on both strategies and their intersection with force options. During the 2016 training cycle, emphasis was placed on how to interact with a person in a behavioral crisis who is also armed with an edged weapon. A total of four scenarios were developed involving an armed individual in which supervisors were required to call for appropriate resources to take the person into custody. While officers were involved acting as contact, cover, less-lethal, shield, hands-on, and other roles, the supervisor was ultimately responsible for developing the team's strategy, communicating the plan, and putting it into motion. While these scenarios had a high likelihood of a positive resolution, it was still an exercise in the team's understanding of the strategies and of operating in a manner that complied with the intent and spirit of the policy. De-escalation concepts have also been integrated with other core concepts such as defensive tactics, team tactics, and firearm training. As part of SPD's overall force review process, all Type II and Type III uses of force assess the following aspects of each incident involving force:

- whether the investigation is thorough and complete
- whether the force was consistent or inconsistent with SPD policy, training, and core principals
- whether, with the goal of continual improvement, there are considerations that need to be addressed regarding, among other concerns:
 - » De-escalation
 - » Supervision
 - » Equipment
 - » Tactics
 - » Training
 - » Policy
 - » Department best practices

Since formalizing the de-escalation policy, SPD has seen a reduction of incidents in which reportable force is being used. In May 2015, SPD instituted a data collection tool to more fully capture officer interaction with individuals in behavioral crises. The goal of the data tool was to track previously unreported aspects of crisis-related incidents and their outcomes. During a review of 9,271 behavioral crisis incidents from May 15, 2015 to May 15, 2016, SPD found that reportable force was used only 149 times (1.61 percent). Of those instances, SPD found that 113 (75.84 percent) involved only Type I force, "which causes transitory pain, the complaint of transitory pain, disorientation, or intentionally pointing a firearm or bean bag shotgun at a person."[†] Within the reporting period, Type II force (causing injury, complaint of injury, or use of less-lethal weapons) occurred 34 times, while only 2 of the incidents involved Type III force (substantial/great bodily harm, loss of consciousness, deadly force). Additionally, for the same reporting period, SPD had a total of 1,061 incidents involving reportable force. This led SPD to determine that reportable force used on individuals in behavioral crisis represents only 14.04 percent of the total reportable force incidents for the entire department.

By focusing efforts on identifying individuals exhibiting signs and symptoms of persons in behavioral crises, as well as training officers on how to safely and effectively interact with people displaying those behaviors, SPD has been able to demonstrate operational effectiveness in employing de-escalation techniques.

Notes:

*Seattle Police Department Manual, §8.100 De-Escalation, <https://www.seattle.gov/police-manual/title-8---use-of-force/8100---de-escalation>.

†Seattle Police Department Manual §8.050 Use of Force Definitions, <https://www.seattle.gov/police-manual/title-8---use-of-force/8050---use-of-force-definitions>.