

Recognizing and Challenging Assumptions and Stereotypes



Every call involving domestic violence or sexual assault requires more than just a procedural response. These calls demand awareness, empathy, and critical reflection. Law enforcement officers are often victims' first point of contact, and an officer's words, tone, and actions can shape whether they feel safe enough to continue seeking protection through the criminal justice system. Recognizing and challenging personal and institutional assumptions helps officers respond fairly and effectively without unconscious bias or stereotypes influencing their decisions. The following five strategies provide practical steps to strengthen trust; enhance credibility; and build safer, more survivor-centered responses in every department.

Tip 1

Engage in regular training to practice challenging assumptions. Stereotypes and unconscious assumptions can shape how officers interpret a victim's credibility, behavior, or motives. It is important to participate in regular training that addresses trauma-informed interviewing, the impact of stereotypes, and cultural responsiveness. Scenario-based exercises used in training should allow officers to practice victim interviewing, empathy-based communications, cultural sensitivity, and other core skills when responding to calls involving people from a variety of backgrounds, identities, and abilities, ensuring that training reflects the diversity of the communities they serve.

Tip 2

Adopt trauma-informed, victim-centered practices. Victims may exhibit emotions or behavior that officers find surprising or unexpected—such as anger, withdrawal, self-destructiveness, confusion, or flat and inconsistent affect. Without an understanding of how trauma affects the brain and body, these behaviors can be misperceived as evasive, manipulative, or even deceitful. Because trauma can disrupt memory formation and recall as well as influence behavior, it is essential for officers to be patient, build rapport with the victim, and use trauma-informed interviewing techniques such as the following:

- **Asking open-ended questions.** Trauma can affect how memories are stored and accessed by the brain, causing a victim's memories to be fragmented, incomplete, or disorganized. Open-ended questions prompt narrative responses based on what the victim is able to remember in their own order. You can ask follow-up questions later to clarify details and chronology, but hold them until after the victim has first provided their uninterrupted narrative.
- **Asking trauma-informed questions.** Trauma-informed questions expand the focus of questions from "just the facts" to include understanding the victim's experience and the event's impact on their life, such as what emotional and sensory experiences they had at the time and how their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors may have been affected as a result. "Why" questions tend to sound accusatory and should be reframed; for example, instead of "why did you . . ." the interviewer might ask "can you tell me more about how you made the decision to . . ."

- **Conducting victim interviews as a process, not a singular event.** Interviewers should allow breaks and expect follow-up interviews, as memories may emerge over time and the process of recall may be complex or difficult. An initial interview should focus on rapport-building, identifying victim safety and service needs, providing information about what to expect from the process, and establishing the general facts of the case. Subsequent interviews can explore more detail, but follow-up questions should start open-ended and broad (for example, “can you tell me more about that?”), before narrowing for clarification.

Tip 3

Seek community and survivor input. Policies and procedures developed from a single perspective can unintentionally overlook critical needs and realities. To build effective, sustainable, and trauma-informed practices, agencies should actively seek input from the broader community, forming collaborations with local advocacy groups, culturally specific service providers, survivor advisory boards, and partners across the justice system. Community feedback is essential when designing response protocols, creating outreach strategies, and developing training curricula.

Tip 4

Challenge individual and organizational biases. Stereotypes persist when they are not challenged by diverse experiences or exposure to people, places, and things that counter them. Peer-to-peer dialogue and engagement are effective tools for addressing stereotypes that can negatively affect an officer’s response to a victim, witness, or alleged offender. Commanders and supervisors should encourage officers to speak up when colleagues use dismissive or prejudicial language; question a victim’s credibility based on appearance or lifestyle; or rely on obsolete, debunked myths about victim behaviors. Supervisors should also regularly review or audit incident reports to screen for indicators of unconscious bias or reliance on myths and stereotypes, such as language that assigns blame to or reflects opinions and assumptions about the victim.

Tip 5

Build partnerships beyond policing. A holistic law enforcement response requires understanding the broader support network of services available to victims. Officers should establish and maintain strong relationships with health care providers, victim advocates, legal aid, and culturally specific service providers to help ensure victims are not stereotyped or retraumatized and have access to comprehensive support. These partnerships are essential for victim safety, access to justice, and long-term healing.

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