

Donna Becker: When there is a concern for the safety of DSS staff due to prior contact with an individual or due to the allegations listed in a CPS or APS referral, we call law enforcement (usually the Schoharie County Sheriff's Office) to accompany our staff. In our experience, the multiple law enforcement officers who respond to these many situations have been professional and focused on their duty to ensure the safety of DSS staff.

Schoharie County Sheriff's Office dispatch number (518-295-8114) is actually DSS's "on-call" or "after-hours" contact number as well. Every month we provide to the Sheriff's office a calendar of DSS staff who are on-call each night for the following month so dispatch can reach DSS staff after hours, on weekends, and during holidays. This greatly assists with collaboration between DSS and the Sheriff's Department in assisting Schoharie County residents with social service needs not only to meet emergency needs after-hours, but to build a relationship with sheriff's deputies to know the many ways DSS can and does assist families.

We recently had a probation officer contact one of our staff for a mother who was completely out of diapers, wipes, toilet paper, and other items for herself and her four children. After a phone call from the officer to our staff, we were able to gather together what she needed from our office's small supply of emergency needs and meet up with the probation officer so the family would have what they needed. This is just one example of how we work with other departments for the benefit of our residents.

Our Legal Staff works very closely with Drug Court, which enables us to collaborate not only with law enforcement but also with the court system.

I firmly believe that our Schoharie County law enforcement agencies are second-to-none in dealing with difficult situations. With this being said, I firmly believe that every person and every agency should strive for constant improvement. Based upon what I know about the headlines of police brutality around the country I had a couple of questions about training and working on community perception including:

Training: When training on use of force, is the law enforcement agency focused on ensuring the response fits the allegation? For example, if an alleged perpetrator runs, or attempts to run, does the officers' training require them to pursue this individual even if the alleged crime is minimal and could be handled with an appearance ticket mailed to the individual or with a visit to the individual's residence later or on another day? Or does the training require a detainment or pursuit with all the inherent danger involved for all concerned? I can compare this to a DSS case – if we are not granted permission to enter a home and/or interview a child, we are required to make a decision whether a child or children are in imminent danger and call 9-1-1, or can we take a step back, discuss the issue with a supervisor, and request a court order for the caregiver to produce the child for an interview or medical exam. Does law enforcement have a similar protocol?

When training on an alleged perpetrator's response to law enforcement, is the law enforcement agency training on the basic "fight, flight, or freeze" survival response? Any alleged perpetrator's only acceptable response is "freeze" when law enforcement arrives, but often this basic instinct is not completely under the individual's control when under extreme stress. Automatic "flight" is an instinct, not necessarily proof of guilt. What are law enforcement recruits taught relative to this basic survival instinct and their response to the different possible instinctual responses exhibited by an individual?

Community Perception: DSS has true empathy with regard to community perception of law enforcement officers. Either we don't do enough, or we are encroaching on the freedoms of our citizens. This is an ongoing work in progress for DSS but is recent and novel to law enforcement agencies who have historically been revered and appreciated by most citizens. By going into a situation with a cautious expectation that the allegations could very well be false and starting a conversation with an alleged perpetrator with this ideal may assist in creating an environment of empathy and cooperation by everyone involved. By thinking more in terms of "Peace Officers" rather than "Police Officers", a completely different persona may be displayed to the individual being questioned and then quickly de-escalate a tense or potentially dangerous situation. Again, I may be stating what our law enforcement officers already do.

Are peace officers patrolling the streets and getting to know the folks in their neighborhoods in good times? If officers aren't afforded the opportunity to get to know their citizens, then they are available only to respond to crisis situations. Those officers then need to deal with, in one isolated incident, a person with whom they know nothing about or, if they've had law enforcement dealings with them before, there may be a negative light cast upon that citizen in a new situation.

Schoharie County is fortunate in that we are a small enough community to get to know many of our neighbors and maybe that's why we haven't had the negative outcomes other cities and towns have had, or maybe we're just lucky and need to learn from the very hard lessons that other towns, cities, and counties have had to learn.

That's all I have unless anyone has any questions.

Q: Do you have any outreach programs? Like parenting things or support groups?

A: We rely on a lot of area agencies like Catholic Charities, SCCAP, places like that. We have contracts and agreements with them to work out a lot of those outreach programs. We refer a lot of our clients to them. But also, a lot of clients go directly to them because they don't want to deal with DSS, and we're fine with that, as long as they get the help that they need.

Q: One of the suggestions that we're hearing around the country is looking at social workers for non-violent, mental illness issues, etc. Would there be a possible way for our County to address some of these things?

A: That's a very debatable suggestion. The issue is would we be riding with the officers because what we do as far as social work takes a whole lot longer than what law officers are there for. I know that some places have different responses where social workers have their own vehicles and go out there with law enforcement. There is a lot of training and a lot of information gathering that would need to be done to make sure everyone stays safe. That's one of the many things people are looking at. There is a lot of debate and there are a lot of social workers who are concerned about that because a lot of times they're in absolute crisis. Someone coming in like me with plain clothes might deescalate the situation or I may be putting myself in danger depending on the situation. It's something we would really need to look at it.

Q: Is your department specifically looking at that?

No, because we're not social workers. We are caseworkers. We are not licensed social workers. Licensed social workers have Master's degrees and deal with services more in line with Mental Health. We are caseworkers and trained a little bit differently. We are trained to protect families, children, adults; we deal with the Food Stamps, Child Support, things like that. We are not actual social workers at DSS. We are social work Caseworkers.

Q: Are they considering hiring any social workers?

A: Not through DSS. Right now, we haven't had any discussions about that. That would require a whole different set of eyes to take a look at that and see if that were feasible.

Q: So, a collaboration, that would be a caseworker from DSS is going into a location and they feel like they might need back up?

A: Yes

Q: So, it's not like the police say hey, are going into a location and we think maybe we could use your help.

A: No, not at this time. If there is an issue with a child in need, they would call us and make a referral and then we would work it. But we are not first responders. We basically have 24-72 hours to respond to a call, where law enforcement needs to be there right away because there's something going on. We can't enter buildings; we can't do all those things without the person's permission. There's a big misconception about what social services can and can't do. But we are definitely not first responders. We don't have the training; we come in afterwards to take a look at the entire situation and do an investigation from there to determine if a child has been abused or neglected and then go from there with services.

Q: So you wouldn't be the ones to actual take a child from the home or you would?

A: We would but it's not necessarily at that first incident unless it's an emergent situation and we get out there. A lot of times law enforcement are called to remove children because it's a life or death situation and they need to get the child out of there, and they safeguard them until we can get there. Every once in a while, we get there when law enforcement is there at the same time, but a lot of time that's not what our requirement is. We are required to respond within 24-72 hours.