

Palm Beach County cops trained to tease out their biases

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By Lawrence Mower - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

For a group of local police officers on Wednesday, Susan Boyle was giving a lesson on how to be a better cop.

No, the graying, frumpy British woman who became an instant celebrity on Britain's Got Talent in 2009 wasn't in attendance. But the video of her surprising judges and the audience with her singing provided a powerful example of something nobody likes to admit: bias.

This week, more than 20 officers from 10 agencies, including the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, are being trained to teach their peers how to combat biases on the job.

The "fair and impartial policing" seminar has the chance to alter the minds and behaviors of thousands of Palm Beach County cops. It's cutting-edge training, considered a "best practice" nationally, and it aims to teach officers two important lessons: That they, like everyone else, have biases, and that those biases can be both dangerous and result in shoddy police work.

"Just because you've got a bias does not mean you're a bad person," said Anna Laszlo, managing partner of Fair and Impartial Policing, LLC. "We've all got them. I've got them."

The training is meant to iron out implicit — not necessarily explicit — bias. Numerous studies have shown that biases are everywhere. But just as people assumed Boyle couldn't sing, officers shouldn't make assumptions about black men, or any other person, based on appearances alone.

The goal, Laszlo said, is to get them thinking in the field, "Would I be treating this person this way if not for their race, sex, or other marker?"

The training is especially important when police-community tensions are at a peak over controversial uses of force by officers across the country. That was not lost on the officers on Wednesday, who were reminded by Laszlo and other trainers that the public has biases against them, too.

Jane Tierney, CEO of Catalyst for Justice, a local group that advocates for better police practices and police-community relations, organized the event and invited The Palm Beach Post to observe the first half-day of the training.

She said it was important for the public to know that local police were doing the training, which was recommended in the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing report. This week's training isn't cheap, either, at \$900 per person. Tierney praised PBSO, in particular, for supporting the program.

"I really believe they deserve credit for that," she said.

It's the 11th time they've had the sessions in Palm Beach County but the first time since The Post and WPTV NewsChannel 5 reported in April about the disproportionate number of shootings against black people and unarmed people by PBSO.

In addition to PBSO, the Coral Gables, Jupiter, Lantana, Palm Beach Gardens, West Palm Beach, Riviera Beach, Boca Raton, Delray Beach and Boynton Beach police departments all sent officers.

It's a small group, but the goal is to have them train officers in their own departments through classroom work, discussions and exercises.

In one exercise, officers respond to a call of rowdy people in a park. The suspects, both men and women actors, have their hands in their pockets — a big no-no to police, who fear they could quickly pull out a gun.

But in the exercises, officers tend to tell the male actors to take their hands out of their pockets, ignoring the women actors, Laszlo said.

That simple bias — that women aren't a threat — has practical implications. When a man and woman ambushed and killed two Las Vegas police officers in 2014, one of the responding SWAT officers noted that he initially ignored the female suspect, believing she was just a shopper. The decision could have been proven fatal for the officer.

The training, which continues through Friday, will address race in policing and potential tools to eliminate bias.