



ACADEMY CURRICULUM RECOMMENDATION

TO: Chief Lisa Davis, Austin Police Department
FROM: Director Gail McCant, Office of Police Oversight
DATE: December 11, 2024
SUBJECT: Interacting with Drivers who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Dear Chief Davis:

The Office of Police Oversight (OPO) is collaborating with the Educational Development Unit of the Austin Police Department (APD) to enhance the academy's curriculum. OPO's Policy Compliance Consultant is a member of the Professional Advisory Committee (PAC), which is responsible for reviewing, evaluating, and providing feedback for improvement.

In addition to the subject matter experts hired by APD, the OPO has reviewed APD's curriculum for Interacting with Drivers who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and provided the following recommendations for improvement:

1. Lesson Objective 1.1: The student will be able to explain the purpose behind the need for this type of training:

APD should use its community engagement resources to query feedback directly from community members impacted by curriculum rewrites. APD should hold a community feedback session at the School for the Deaf or a town hall to gather real-life scenarios and lived experiences. This will help them better understand how to serve this community. Additionally, videos and feedback from the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community regarding their experiences with law enforcement can help inform the curriculum.

2. Lesson Objective 2.1: The student will be able to discuss appropriate techniques utilized to interact with drivers who are deaf and hard of hearing:

The current suggestions, such as using a typewriter or word processor for communication, are directly pulled from the ADA website and are outdated. These options need to be updated to reflect the current technology used by APD and adhere to The City of Austin's Language Access policy.

3. Lesson Objective 2.3: The student will be able to distinguish what situations require an interpreter:

Provide students with clear instructions on how to contact an interpreter internally and steps to take if they are unable to secure one. Include relevant links, phone numbers, and alternative communication methods. Arrange for an interpreter from the contracted service to speak to the class about specific scenarios and best practices for effective communication with the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community.



4. Lesson Objective 5.1: The student will be able to understand some of the history of sign language.

Focus the curriculum on specifics related to the City of Austin, including The School for the Deaf. The OPO agrees that certain aspects of the curriculum, such as the section on the history of sign language (Lesson Objective 5.1) and the lesson on Gallaudet University (Lesson Objective 5.2), do not provide the essential skills that students need to interact with the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community in Austin.

5. Active Learning -Large Group Discussion: Utilize the following scenarios as an educational opportunity for the class by conducting a role-play activity.

Note: The curriculum notes state that this section “would be more effective if taught with the assistance of a person from the Deaf community.”

APD should incorporate more videos and role-playing exercises to give students a variety of scenarios in which to practice communication in a controlled environment. Include enough time for role-playing, preferably with a community volunteer from the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community. This will enable students to practice specific communication skills to be used when interacting with the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

6. Lesson Objective 4.1- The student will read the article, “Tone Deaf”, and discuss to better understand the past relationship with APD and the deaf community:

The 2010 article “Tone Deaf,” used as a discussion point on what NOT to do, is outdated. APD should highlight more recent examples of experiences with the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community both within Austin and nationally.

Additional Comments:

To improve the current curriculum, the subject matter experts (SMEs) hired by APD should gather qualitative input from communities directly impacted by the curriculum under review. This feedback will help them better understand the challenges and needs of those communities in their interactions with law enforcement and, therefore, make effective and informed improvements to the curriculum. The SMEs should also include any relevant academic sources and national best practices in their curriculum updates.

The Town Hall, hosted by the Office of Police Oversight in September 2021, provided valuable insights after gathering feedback from community participants. One such insight was that “APD needs to utilize more training resources, improve communication, and increase engagement with people with disabilities. With improved community relations, the burden of ensuring that law enforcement understands the unique needs of community members with disabilities does not fall on these individuals, their families, or their caretakers.” (*Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing*, 09, 2021, p.6).

The following is feedback directly from the Austin community, which was included in the OPO *Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing* (September 2021):



[Town Hall for People with Disabilities Report FINAL.pdf](#)

“There is a significant amount of distrust within the deaf community with law enforcement, several negative interactions were mentioned, cases where officers were either not responsive or had to really be pushed to provide service or support.” (p. 5)

“Some participants said it is essential to have access to communication tools and technology that fit specific and unique needs so that people with disabilities can communicate directly with officers and not burden partners or other support systems.” (p.6)

“Other participants mentioned a need for more opportunities for individuals with lived experience to communicate with officers and APD at all levels about their experiences.” (p.6)

Note: **TCOLE highly recommends that this class include a co-presenter from the Deaf community.

The Office of Police Oversight appreciates the chance to offer constructive feedback on the Austin Police Department's academy curriculum, recognizing that there is room for improvement. We look forward to ongoing collaboration on current and future curriculum development to ensure continuous improvement and effectiveness.

Sincerely,

Gail McCant

