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StopWatch program helps T police defuse tense interactions with young riders

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Transit Police Lieutenant Mark Gillespie speaks to a group of teens at Forest Hills Station earlier this school year.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Transit Police Detective Bryan Ostergren spotted a switchblade clipped to the belt of an 18-year-old standing with a group of high school students at the Forest Hills MBTA station.

He and the teen shared a tense moment at first. A reporter noticed that the young man seemed confrontational, and it took him a minute or so to realize he was not about to be admonished or arrested by the stern but calm detective.

Upon noticing his friends were no longer nearby, the teen's tough stance loosened as the two chatted. He listened, nodded and even shook hands with the detective as they parted.

Ostergren and his colleague, Lieutenant Mark Gillespie, who was with the detective during the encounter, said they made use of several techniques they have learned from uniquely focused, psychology-based training on how to deal with youths.

The law enforcement duo contend the training, along with partnerships established in recent years with other community agencies, has vastly improved

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interaction between police and the estimated 40,000 young people who ride the city's public transit system each weekday.

"We're creating a new way of dealing with youth so it's not confrontational or hostile," Gillespie said.

Taught by doctors and health experts from area medical institutions, the police learn why teens think the way they think and act the way they act. The officials study how to deal with a segment of the adolescent population segment that some adults may struggle to understand and communicate with.

The training is one component of a broader initiative called StopWatch that Transit Police and a slew of other Boston area agencies [partnered to begin eight years ago](#). Since its inception, the number of youth arrested in MBTA subway stations has plummeted, official said.

Transit Police arrested 680 youths in 2001, the same year – one decade ago this October – a federal civil rights lawsuit was filed on behalf of 11 teenagers who said T detectives had interrogated and arrested middle and high school students without cause.

The lawsuit prompted introspection for police, who conducted an informal survey that found more than 35 percent of young T riders said they were frightened by their commute to school each day.

Two years later, with some changes already instituted in how the department handled policing of youths, the MBTA paid \$70,000 to settle the lawsuit and StopWatch launched as a pilot program.

By 2004, the youth arrests figure had fallen to around 250. That year more than 180 MBTA police began to receive intensive training to understand teen psychology in order to improve how officers dealt with youth in the field. Two years ago, just 84 youth arrests were made.

"We've seen extraordinary improvement," in how law enforcement officials interact with youth, said Lisa Thureau, president of Strategies for Youth, a Cambridge-based nonprofit that aims to improve relations between youth and law enforcement. "They've really changed the way they approach youths."

Thureau led the effort to institute the training initiative Transit Police adopted in 2004. Here organization is one of the groups involved in StopWatch, which is made up of authority figures from a wide-range of aspects in youths' lives.

The partnership includes Transit Police, the Boston Police Department, Boston Public Schools' police, the Boston Centers for Youth and Families, Suffolk County Juvenile Probation, the Cambridge Public Schools' Mediation Program, along with members of juvenile advocacy organizations, religious leaders from local congregations and school administrators.

Each entity involved in StopWatch shares its unique resources and expertise, officials said.

Timely information, some of which is overheard in cafeterias, classrooms schoolyards and T stops, is relayed in person, via cell phones and by e-mail on a constant basis across the entire program in order to monitor, prevent, and respond to instances of youth mischief or crime on MBTA trains and buses and inside stations.

"We're making kids realize there's a community holding them accountable for their behavior," Thureau said. "It's not in their best interest to misbehave."

On weekday afternoons, representatives from the program's various partners meet at a MBTA station. Which stop and the time are preselected based on a number of factors, including where youth-related incidents have been reported most frequently in recent weeks as well as when the largest volumes of city school students are expected to travel through that station after dismissal.

After encountering the knife-carrying teen on the first Monday afternoon of the school year, Gillespie said that had the same incident occurred before he had been trained to better understand teens, he probably would have told the young man: "Give me the knife and get out of here" – which might have worked but, would have more likely escalated the situation.

When Detective Ostergren had approached that teen, the young man tried to puff out his chest, make himself taller, and put his angered face within an inch or two of the detective.

But Ostergren said he knew from his training not to display signs of aggression. Such actions could further inflame the teen, who, according to the field of psychology, is in a stage of his life where his innate desire to prove his independence can cloud his judgment.

Gillespie said the positive interaction may improve the teen's perception of law enforcement.

"We don't try to overpower students. We try to use reason with them and we have the understanding that youths need to be told sometimes 15 times before they obey," he said.

Last week, Dr. Jeff Bostic, a director and psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital, held an annual review of teen psychology training for Transit Police. His slideshow featured statistics and hard scientific data to back up his explanations of teen brain and behavioral development -- and some comic relief.

"Adolescents being difficult to work with is not anything new," he told the crowd. "Biologically, they go through changes that make them obnoxious to deal with."

"We're not critical of the officers," he added in an interview after the presentation. "We want them to understand that the brains of teenagers are different."

Before that annual re-training, one of the program's founders was remembered by his colleagues, friends and family during the first annual Captain Billy Hickey StopWatch Awards ceremony.

Hickey spent more than 30 years as a Boston School Police officer. Gillespie said that during interactions with youths, the patient man was known for telling other law enforcement officials: "This kid needs a break."

"He just had people talk to each other. He had respect. He was hilarious. He often used his humor to diffuse situations," recalled Hickey's 30-year-old daughter, Bryanne. "He'd hang out in the train stations and just watch the kids."

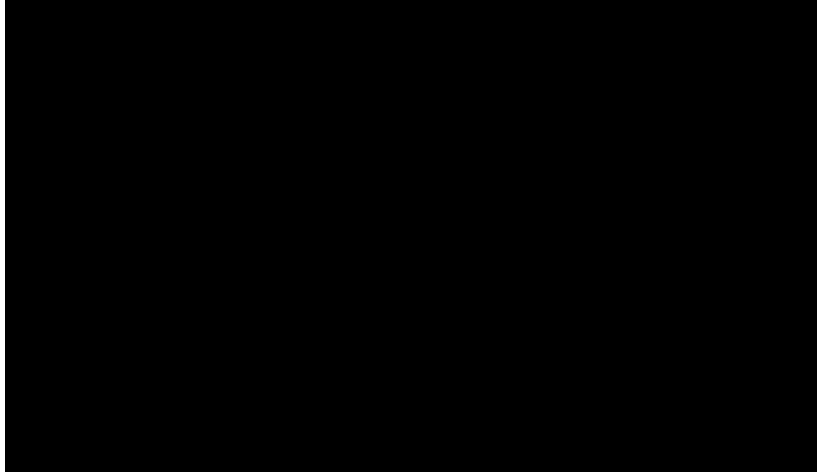
The late police captain's catchphrase and his character are central themes for StopWatch.

"Our last resort is to make an arrest," Gillespie said.

Michael P. Ross, District 8 City Councilor who chairs the council's public safety committee, and Transit Police Chief Paul MacMillan each said the program thrives on its partnerships and its own success.

"We're paid thinkers now instead of paid enforcers," MacMillan said.

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(Courtesy: Transit Police)

The above video from the MBTA and Transit Police details the StopWatch program.



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