

# Former New Haven Officer Gives Police Training In De-Escalation

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**W**ETHERSFIELD — The body camera video shows a police officer in Salt Lake City, Utah approach a man whom neighbors said had been knocking on doors offering to shovel snow.

The officer begins questioning him. After a few minutes of mildly tense back and forth, the situation suddenly escalates. The man becomes furious, begins yelling and swearing and swings a snow shovel at the officer, knocking him down and breaking his body camera. The officer then shot him dead, a killing later ruled justified.

Retired New Haven police Lt. Ray Hassett turns off the video and asks the roomful of police officers from around the state for their observations. One notes that the officer repeatedly talked over the man.

"Is there any communication between this guy and the officer? No," Hassett says, while emphasizing he was not there. "What emotion did you feel in his (the man's) voice? Was there an attempt by the officer to slow down a little bit? The closer you get to combat, the less and less choice you have."

Welcome to Hassett's course on how officers can de-escalate tense situations and avoid shootings.

Police shootings, particularly involving minorities, have become a burning national issue since the killing of Michael Brown by a Ferguson, Mo. officer last year. Brown's death led to days of rioting and a new nationwide focus on police shootings, especially of young black men.

Hassett, a barrel-chested man with a modified Mohawk haircut, piercing eyes and a walrus mustache, who worked in some of New Haven's highest crime areas, said he believes finding ways to reduce police shootings is vitally important.

"We certainly have enough training in how to escalate," the 25-year veteran said. "We need more training in how to de-escalate. This course is extremely relevant because it gives officers the ability and the tools they need to de-escalate a situation."

Hassett, got the idea for the course, called The New Face of Law Enforcement, before the Ferguson shooting. He was going to countries where kidnapping for ransom is common to teach hostage negotiation skills. On one such trip to India about a year and a half ago, a security officer who had battled terrorists who killed 164 people in Mumbai in 2008, told him he could have used those same skills in that situation.

In response, Hassett developed the course and then began giving it to officers in New Haven, at Yale and in other jurisdictions. The course is through the Connecticut Alliance to Benefit Law Enforcement, a nonprofit organization of law enforcement and mental health professionals and advocates.

So what is the most important thing that an officer can do to defuse a potentially violent situation?

"Slow it down," Hassett said, advice he repeats often during the course. "Give yourself a chance to know what's

going on. Let the other person know that you are listening to their frustration and anger. Give them a moment to talk about it."

Hassett's other key tips include: Keep your distance, giving the officer more choices and making the citizen feel less threatened. Tell the person your name and try to learn his. Listen and remain silent if the person wishes to vent. Ask, "Are you okay?" Watch body language for cues. Try to establish a rapport and understand what is upsetting the person.

Above all, officers should try to avoid triggering a fight-or-flight reaction. For most people, an encounter with a police officer is stressful, Hassett said. Officers should strive to make it less stressful, he said.

"We are trying to normalize an abnormal event," he said.

During a break, Wethersfield Det. Norberto Mendez said that he found the course very useful.

"I think training is very important," Mendez said. "Training like this really helps officers deal with situations like that."

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