



A state trooper confers with a motorist near Lake Titus in June 2015 during the hunt for escaped prisoner David Sweat. PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

Policing for community

Training initiative puts focus on serve and protect

BY GWENDOLYN CRAIG

Awoman contacted Maj. R. Anthony Oliver, commander for the New York State Police in Ray Brook, seeking advice. Her son was about to take his driver license test. She asked Oliver if she should tape his registration to the front of the glove box.

The mother didn't want her son—a child of color—killed for reaching into the compart-

ment during a traffic stop, Oliver said.

"She's been exposed to the news, the feeling of Black children or people of color have a high incidence of getting shot by the police," he said. "That breaks my heart."

These sentiments are crushing for Oliver, not only because the 57-year-old has served for more than three decades, but also because he grew up feeling safe around police. His father was an officer.

"To me, when I'm around a police officer, it's comforting," Oliver said. "I feel safe, but

not everybody does."

Communities of color have experienced negative interactions with police for generations, said Lorenzo Boyd, a former police officer turned professor and law enforcement relations consultant. The result can lead to community trauma and vicarious trauma, where those negative images from historic events impact how people may act and feel around police.

Boyd works with communities and police agencies providing the points of view of both.

Oliver and other area police officers met with Boyd in several discussions during an inaugural community policing initiative last year sponsored by the Adirondack Diversity Initiative.

Boyd and his colleagues with Renz Consulting worked with 52 officers across the North Country. More are expected to participate this year including forest rangers and environmental conservation officers.

The training will cost \$500,000 for five years. Private donors have funded the first two years.

“The whole purpose of this training is to make a difference,” Boyd said. “We need to build bridges.”

The diagnosis

The Adirondack Diversity Initiative formed in 2015. Executive Director Nicole Hylton-Patterson and co-founder Pete Nelson brought in Boyd to strengthen the relationship between police and Adirondack Park communities and visitors. Hylton-Patterson said his consulting firm would also help police agencies address state executive order 203. It requires local governments to review policies, procedures and practices and develop new plans “to foster trust, fairness, and legitimacy, and to address any racial bias and disproportionate policing of communities of color.”

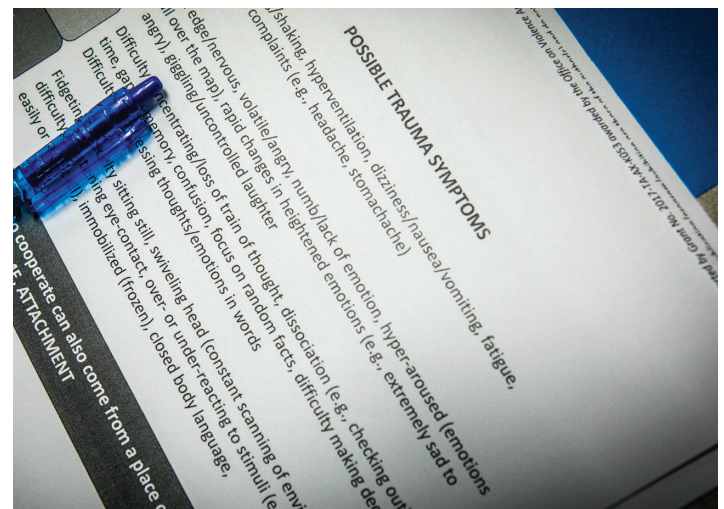
Former Gov. Andrew Cuomo issued the or-

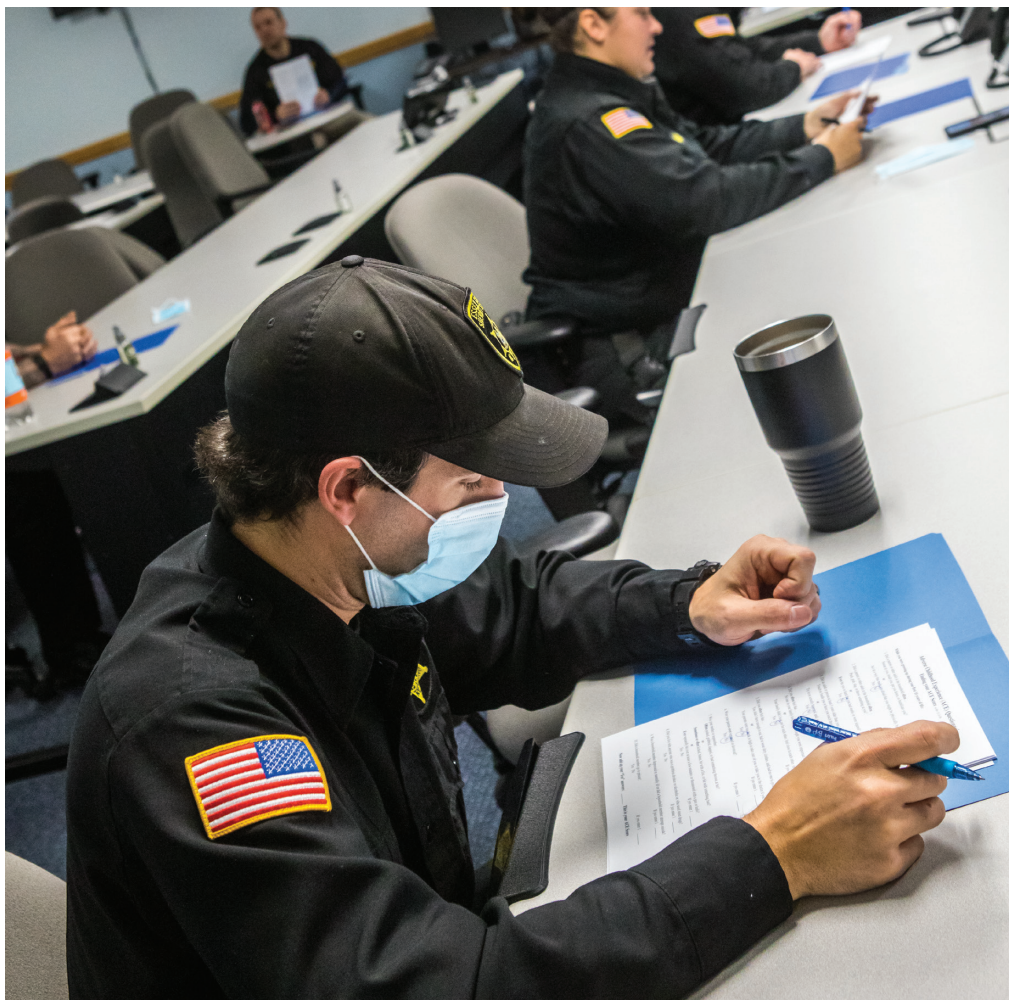
der in June 2020, shortly after George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer in Minnesota.

While ADI is funding Renz Consulting, some local governments, including Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake, hired consultants Lexipol to address the executive order. Lexipol, also started by former police officers, has been criticized by some entities, including the local Adirondack chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. They believe the company’s program does not emphasize de-escalation techniques. In a statement to the Adirondack Explorer, a Lexipol spokesperson said it’s company policy “requires officers to use de-escalation techniques.”



North Country police attend an Adirondack Diversity Initiative training led by Lorenzo Boyd of Renz Consulting LLC in December 2021 (far left). Attendees included Lake Placid and Essex County police. Below is a training document. PHOTOS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA





North Country law enforcement officers attend a training session offered by the Adirondack Diversity Initiative at Essex County Public Safety Building in December 2021. PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

lation tactics when time and circumstances permit.” The policies are also a starting point, the spokesperson added, and should be tailored to individual departments.

Boyd is a former deputy sheriff from Boston, who earned a doctorate in sociology from Northeastern University. He teaches at the University of New Haven in Connecticut. The founder and president of Renz Consulting, he sets up seminars on best practices for policing.

Renz Consulting employs current and former police officers, lawyers, public safety specialists and criminal justice experts to lead programs. They have worked with more than 40 police agencies across the country.

Boyd also approaches the training as a doctor might—making a diagnosis, then prescribing treatment.

In September 2020, Boyd and his team held listening sessions in Saranac Lake and Lake Placid, learning from community mem-

bers, elected officials and local law enforcement agencies. His team read media reports going back two years. The research provided a perspective on what was happening in the North Country, Boyd said.

One of the things Boyd and his colleagues found was that many of the officers in the region did not understand some community members’ anxiety in dealing with the police.

Officers assumed that people would see them as they saw themselves—good public servants doing their job. They didn’t realize that the national news of the police killings of Black people, such as Floyd and Breonna Taylor, made some people more apprehensive of police. Taylor was a 26-year-old killed by police in her Kentucky home.

The prescription

Officers from the Essex County Sheriff’s Department, Lake Placid Police, New York State

Police Troop B, Potsdam Police and State University of New York Potsdam Campus Police participated in the Renz Consulting training.

Split into groups of four, officers attended three, eight-hour sessions last year, though some were unable to make each one. Oliver said state police underwent body camera training around the same time as one of the sessions, causing some to miss the diversity training. Essex County Sheriff David Reynolds said some of his staff also left a session early to respond to the tragic drowning of a man and his 3-year-old son in Lake Champlain.

Boyd said much of the training calls for introspection. He asks questions like, “why do you feel the way you feel, and why do you believe the way you believe?” Officers are given a “safe space” in a classroom to be open and honest about their feelings and answers.

“The classroom is where I want you to make the mistakes,” Boyd said.

The first session focused on the history of policing in the United States and where some of the bad relationships between police and communities of color started.

In the second session participants talked about the concept of justice and profiling by proxy. For example, Boyd said he had copious examples of a white person calling the police about “a suspicious Black person in my community.” It’s the police officer’s job, Boyd explained, to find out what a person might be doing that is suspicious.

“Because you don’t see Black people that doesn’t mean that they’re suspicious when you do see them,” Boyd said. “Our job is to normalize the diversity of people that use the Adirondack Park.”

The second session delved into how news reports showing police using force against people of color can affect the way community members address and see officers.

Officers are given homework. Some of it involves engaging with the community rather than focusing on law enforcement, a term that Boyd said generally implies waiting for someone to do something wrong. Policing is a term that better reflects the service aspect of the job, he said.

The third session focused on what happens to people’s brains when they go through a traumatic event. Trainers talked about officer wellness, coping skills and the trauma police officers experience.

Boyd said Adirondack Park-area police have different challenges compared to those in places like Syracuse or New York City. In a city, an officer’s closest backup is probably around

the corner, Boyd said, but in the Adirondacks, backup could be an hour away. Renz instructors brought up ways to engage and approach people, exit situations and resolve problems in rural settings.

Impact

Reynolds attended all of the sessions and so did most of his staff. The 46-year-old has been sheriff of one of the largest counties in New York for three years and has been policing for 22 years. Essex County is also one of two counties entirely within the Adirondack Park.

He admitted feeling guarded upon entering the first session.

“There was such a negative view on law enforcement,” Reynolds said. “That’s all we were getting pounded with. ... When we got talking about everything and he (Boyd) understood our concerns and we understood his, I think it really made his message stick with us, and I think we taught him some things, too.”

“We didn’t go and tell them how to do their job,” Boyd said. “We offered them a litany of new coping tools to add to their expertise in how they deal, and it’s this understanding and

copied that makes the difference.”

Reynolds said his biggest takeaway was realizing that you don’t know what other people’s experiences have been.

“Usually when we deal with somebody, it’s the worst day of their life,” Reynolds said. Knowing that and considering the person may have had a bad experience with police in the past, officers may go into a situation with more understanding and patience, he said.

James Harris, a lieutenant with New York State Police Troop B, echoed Reynold’s feeling. He said the training “provided me with insight and a perspective that someone outside my own demographic may have toward law enforcement.”

Harris and Oliver said the training did not change the way they do their jobs.

“I feel we are dedicated in treating everyone with the same level of courtesy, integrity and professionalism,” Harris said.

But Harris did feel the sessions were worth the time and effort, noting that any training helps with personal and professional growth.

Oliver described the sessions as useful for approaching people in a non-threatening way to

keep everyone safe.

Lake Placid Police Chief William Moore, who retired in late January, did not attend but sent seven officers from his department to the sessions. They reported that the training was interesting and enlightening. Moore said he would assign more to future sessions.

Nelson said ADI has secured funding for training this year, and that the state Department of Environmental Conservation has agreed to participate. Forest rangers and conservation police officers assigned to Region 5 and possibly from Region 6 may attend.

“This training is one example of our ongoing collaboration and will build upon DEC’s existing training to reduce racial inequities in policing, prevent implicit bias, increase positive engagement and foster trust between law enforcement and all residents and visitors to the Adirondacks,” a DEC spokesperson wrote.

Nelson said the sessions have exceeded his expectations and appreciates that police forces found ways within their budgets and schedules to participate.

“We’re really grateful for their commitment,” he said. ■

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