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Deflection Training in Clifton

By Ariana Puzzo



O2SL members Scott Allen and Maureen Cavanagh, center wearing white, with members of the Clifton Health Department, Clifton Community Policing, and the Passaic County Department of Human Services.

Drug overdose responses have historically differed for health officials, social workers, and law enforcement. Clifton, like communities around the country, strives to bridge that gap through the education and training of its front-line responders.

Members of the Clifton Health Department, Clifton Community Policing, and the Passaic County Department of Human Services attended a two-day Deflection Academy on July 25 and 26. The training at the Community Recreation Center, 1232 Main Ave, was hosted by Operation 2 Save Lives (O2SL) & QRT National.

Its goal was to foster a more cohesive and collaborative process between community partners and law enforcement when caring for individuals with substance use disorder (SUD).

“It was probably one of the best training [experiences] in my 33-year career. It really resonated with me,” said Clifton Health Officer John Biegel. “We really never had social services prior to last year, but the need is really there.”

“The amount of homeless individuals and the mental health issues have led to us expanding our mental health programs ... [and] we need to reach our community,” added Biegel, 57.

Clifton Social Worker Adriana Alfaro agreed, stating that O2SL’s Deflection training for the city and county workers gave everyone a better knowledge of how to go into the field and “deal with someone who may be having an overdose, and also to follow up with them.”

“A big part is ... following up with individuals and making sure they receive the care that they need afterwards within 48 hours,” said Alfaro, 31. “[It] is also connecting them to resources that are there to help individuals, [as well as] providing the resources for family members or whoever may live at home with them.”

“It’s about understanding addiction and that it is a disease,” she added. “And how to navigate the resources within the community based on what [someone] needs and is looking for, and doing this together with the police.”

Planting Seeds

Leading the two-day training were O2SL team members Scott Allen and Maureen Cavanagh.

Allen, O2SL's chief operating officer, is a retired Chief of Police from East Bridgewater, Mass. He has over 25 years of law enforcement experience and, along with Vice President of Business Development Michael Botieri, launched O2SL in 2020. Shortly thereafter, Allen and Botieri met current O2SL Director of Operations Daniel Meloy, which led to the merger with QRT National in January of 2021.

"We're all doing this work because it's personal for us," said Allen, 53. "It's all about breaking down silos and working collaboratively, with police departments talking about policing through a public health lens."


For Cavanagh, it's deeply personal. She's an educator and Family Addiction Recovery Advocate for O2SL. She also founded and serves as the president of Magnolia New Beginnings, a public charity dedicated to advocating for people affected by a substance use disorder. The New York Times bestselling author wrote, "If You Love Me: A Mother's Journey Through Her Daughter's Addiction and



Recovery", published by Henry Holt/Macmillan in 2018.

Cavanagh's belief system is the idea that addiction is a family disease. It's through support and educating families that communities can work toward "improved care and sustained recovery."

"Maureen brings her value as an educator ... [and] has created her own curriculums," said Allen. "Her focus is educating audiences on the importance of a family member or loved one's support."

"People in recovery often cite their loved one's support as the reason they were able to connect to a treatment that's successful," Allen added. "We bring a mixture of professional and frontline experience." 



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Allen discussed how his own early law enforcement experiences lacked that unified approach. His background before retiring as Chief of Police was as a detective who ran a drug task force for most of his career.

“If you told me 30 years ago that I’d be doing this today, I’d say no way,” said Allen. “The only tool in the tool belt when I was at the Police Academy in 1995 was identifying drugs and making arrests.”

His perspective began shifting as a sergeant. Allen attended meetings where he heard firsthand accounts from the loved ones of individuals who overdosed. His exposure to groups like Angel Initiative — which helps place people requesting addiction support into treatment — helped him to “better appreciate the challenges.”

Allen stressed that education is every bit as important as connecting people to the help that they need.

“The big message was bringing resources and showing people you care in your community,” he said, “because the stigma [around addiction] is still so strong, and people die because they are so ashamed.”

Allen’s early engagement helping launch a drop-in center in his own community would ultimately morph into O2SL’s outreach model. Over the years, he’s witnessed mixed responses. Some loved ones were wary of law enforcement following up with treatment experts and peer recovery specialists.

Yet Allen noted how no one turned them away, including him during his 30 outreach visits.

“They would say, ‘Come into my living room, thank you for caring about my son or daughter,’” he said. “They’d listen and maybe not take treatment options the first time, but it planted seeds. People would later reach out and say, ‘I think my son or daughter is ready for treatment.’”

Real-Life Application

O2SL & QRT National has partners in other states like Kentucky, Connecticut, West Virginia, and Massachusetts. Nevertheless, Allen said he enjoyed his two days of bringing the Deflection Academy to Clifton.

“It’s unique to see a community that has such great engagement with its Health Department like Clifton does,” said Allen. “[John Biegel] and his bosses have already broken down silos with the police department. You can tell it’s a special community.”

Those who attended the Deflection Academy think highly of O2SL and its representatives.

“I think the most valuable thing about the training is the follow-up,” said Nate King, a social services assistant for Clifton. “We are trying to ... weave connections not just with an overdosing individual, but with the family.”

King, 38, recalled that the first training lesson was writing down five important things to you. The attendees swapped lists and were told to identify two things they felt they can deal without, then give an explanation to their partner. One takeaway from the lesson stuck with King.

“It’s not up to you to decide what is most important to that person,” King recalled. “‘You can’t assume what’s important to the individual you’re helping.’ Right out of the gate that was helpful.”

City social worker Tom Sadowski found the training led to having his “primal instincts rewired.” It also saw two trainees, a police officer, and a community engagement specialist responding to a call within two weeks of the training. Learned “situational awareness skills” from their Deflection training helped de-escalate a behavioral health emergency.

It goes beyond overdose cases. Sadowski, 34, said it helped after the first day of feedback and facts to jump into roleplays the second day. “You feel more comfortable in a situation afterwards,” he said. “You feel more prepared.”

A New Way of Working

The training was a worthwhile supplement for what Sgt. Gary V. Giardina said the Clifton Police have striven to provide for years.

“We went over basically the first interactions with people, which was new for the social workers, because usually they didn’t go to the scenes of people’s houses,” said Giardina, 38. “It was great to learn how to introduce the services that we already offer but people don’t know about.”

Giardina became a police officer in 2006 and joined Clifton’s Police Department in 2009. As part of the Botany Village Satellite Office, 207 Parker Ave, which marked one year of operation this past April, Giardina said the training helped formalize their services.

Giardina noted the Community Policing Division is supportive of creating a plan and procedure. He found that New Jersey’s Overdose Prevention Act, signed into law by former Governor Chris Christie on May 2, 2013, is what turned the tide. The act prevents the prosecution of individuals seeking emergency medical treatment during an overdose, even people in possession of drugs or paraphernalia.

“It’s not talking about drug dealers and large quantities. It’s the users who may have used a bag of heroin and overdosed,” Giardina explained. “We obviously seize the drugs ... once we have identified them. The job drastically changed,” he continued. “It went from basically doing an arrest to truly trying to help people.”

Giardina said, like anything else, the evolving models include a learning curve. Yet he believes it has gone smoothly thus far. “Most of the time, all police officers want to do is help people,” said Giardina. “It’s now allowed us to do that.”

Earlier this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released its provisional data that shows an ongoing flattening of drug overdose deaths throughout 2022 and early 2023. The data indicates the halt of a years-long period of rapid increases in deaths from 2019 to 2021.

For additional support, call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at 1-800-662-4357. SAMHSA has free and confidential 24/7/365 treatment referral and information services in English and Spanish for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

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