**Recommendations for Police Officers Who Serve the Disabled**

**Abstract:**

Disability is a multi-faceted spectrum of conditions that disproportionately impact the populations that police tend to interact with. Due to the varied and complex nature of disability, there are many gaps in police engagement that can lead to miscarriages of justice. The Secure Communities Forum, an international initiative supported by the Ministry of Interior of the United Arab Emirates runs an international working group titled “The International Working Group on Public Safety and People of Determination”, spearheading global dialogue on this subject. People of a determination, is a unique term used in the United Arab Emirates to describe people with disabilities, highlighting their contributions and strength, rather than differences.

There are numerous ways to better serve this community, including creating accessible law enforcement institutions, hiring disability specialists that officers can consult with, screening for oft-overlooked disabilities such as traumatic brain injuries, and targeted education programs for all law enforcement personnel. This article represents recommendations elaborated by an international expert group within the Safer Communities Forum. Each of these recommendations can significantly improve the quality and efficacy of police interactions with the disabled.

**I. Introduction: What Qualifies as Disability?**

Disability is defined as “the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation on an equal basis with others” (United Nations). It has three main subtypes: physical, intellectual, and psychosocial. While the first two are well-known, the third requires elaboration. Psychosocial disabilities is a term developed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and is defined as ”the experience of people with impairments and participation restrictions related to mental health conditions in general” (Addlakha, 2020). Individuals with disabilities have special protections including an injunction on states to provide the disabled with accommodations to “ensure effective access to justice for persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others” (Article 13, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; see Articles 11-17 for a more extensive elaboration on disability rights as they interact with justice agencies).

Police disproportionately interact with individuals across the spectrum of disability, when interacting with both victims (Spaan and Nienke, 2019) and offenders (McDaniel, 2019). For example, dyslexia prevalence for youth offenders in the UK is an estimated 33-47% higher than among non-offending youth (Hughes et al., 2012). Additionally, disabilities can produce atypical behaviors that communities require police assistance to manage. A common example of this phenomenon is traumatic brain injuries, which can decrease impulse control. A study from England found that the prevalence of traumatic brain injuries among incarcerated youth to be 60% (William, 2012). Regarding victims, disabled individuals are twice as prevalent among victims of crime as their non-disabled counterparts (Spaan and Nienke, 2019).

In Germany, official statistics state that 7.8 million Germans are seriously disabled, a little less than 10% of the population. Further, according to the German Society of Psychiatry, 27.8% of Germans have a mental illness (“Basisdaten zu psychischen…”, 2024). This totals over 17 million citizens, less than 20% of whom seek therapy each year (“Basisdaten zu psychischen…”, 2024). German police are receiving increased public scrutiny for how they interact with the broad spectrum of disability. For example, German police were criticized after the fatally shooting of Mohamed Idrissi in 2020, a man who was known to have paranoid schizophrenia. Many blame inadequate police training as a cause for such incidents. Further, of the 15 individuals who died from German police shootings from 2017 to 2022, 11 had severe mental illness (“Ist die Polizei…”, 2022). In several cities police have begun to dedicate resources to providing disability-related training, including in Munich and Hamburg. In Lower Saxony, police recently used a variety of innovative methods while searching for a six-year-old with autism (“Kinderleiche ist Arian…”, 2024).

It is crucial that police are provided with sufficient knowledge to optimally serve this community. The purpose of this article is to offer actionable, concise steps that practitioners can take to improve interactions with disabled individuals.

**II. Recommendations**

The Secure Communities Forum is a global initiative dedicated to enhancing community security and resilience by fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. It brings together experts, practitioners, policymakers, and community leaders to address contemporary security challenges. The forum aims to create safer and more resilient communities worldwide through innovative solutions and shared knowledge.

Based on the SCF’s previous efforts on this topic it is recommended that:

1. All law enforcement institutions must be accessible to people with disabilities. Given that disabled individuals are significantly more likely to be victims of crime, law enforcement institutions must be accessible so that disabled individuals are able to effectively report crimes and receive justice. Further, mentally ill persons are three times as likely to be victims of crime; part of accessibility is understanding this phenomenon and destigmatizing severely mentally ill persons reporting crimes (Finzen, 2014a).There should also be individuals who specialize in accessibility who can assist officers when making reports from individuals with disabilities that impact cognition or communication.

2. Ensure that accommodations are made throughout the criminal justice system so that disabled individuals fully understand their rights and their situation. Particularly when working with offenders, individuals with disabilities may struggle to understand the significance of their situation. Such miscommunications can lead to false convictions and other miscarriages of justice (Davis, 2009).

3. Include screening for less visible disabilities, particularly traumatic brain injuries. Offending populations have a high incidence of traumatic brain injuries. In fact, an estimated 30-40% of incarcerated individuals have moderate or severe brain injuries (Hughes et al., 2012). When in custody, individuals should have a brief screening to detect head injuries, information which can help police more effectively interact with these populations.

4. Targeted education programs can reduce stigma, which can improve the quality of interactions between disabled individuals and police. Police and other first responders frequently do not receive sufficient training for working with disabled populations (Woodham-Ford et al., 2014). Training related to handling individuals experiencing mental health crises, traumatic brain injuries, autism, and other disabilities is crucial to improving police interactions with disabled individuals. German police, especially in more populated cities, interact with disabled persons every day (Feltes, 2023). Given that in Germany, most fatal encounters with police occur when an individual is experiencing a mental health crisis, learning de-escalation tactics is also crucial to ensuring police are adequately prepared to serve their communities (Finzen, 2014b).

6. Hire virtually accessible disability specialists who are trained to handle mental health crises and other special needs, such as sign language. It is unrealistic to expect police officers to become experts in the entire spectrum of disabilities. Thus, law enforcement institutions should hire specialists who can support police officers when they interact with disabled individuals. This is particularly relevant when individuals have disabilities that affect communication, such as being deaf.

The expert group is continuing their work in 2024 with the intention to conduct a first international survey among police services concerning their awareness and preparedness for the interactions with persons with disabilities.

This should serve as a gap analysis for the elaboration of specific training packages. Already by now, an international collection of relevant sources, documents, and materials can be found on the website of the SCF.

**III. Discussion and Conclusions**

Police officers frequently serve disabled populations. Justice cannot be served while disabled victims are unable to properly report crimes and disabled accused offenders struggle to understand their rights and the significance of their situation. While the German police have made significant steps to improve how they interact with disabled citizens, it is crucial that these efforts become institutionalized and continue to expand. There are numerous ways to better serve this community, including creating accessible law enforcement institutions, hiring disability specialists that officers can consult with, screening for oft-overlooked disabilities such as traumatic brain injuries, and targeted education programs for all law enforcement personnel. Each of these recommendations can significantly improve the quality and efficacy of police interactions with the disabled.   
  
**Authors**:  
**Detlef Schroeder,** Former Director of CEPOL

**Eitan Charnoff,** Secretariat, Secure Communities Forum

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