

Improv to Empower People With Disabilities—and Train First Responders



Lisa Schoenbrodt (front row, far right) helps self-advocate educators use improv to teach communication skills to first responders.

Lisa Schoenbrodt, chair of Loyola University Maryland's Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences Department, is helping people with intellectual and developmental disabilities train police officers and other first responders how to communicate with them in emergencies.

The participants, called "self-advocate educators," learn to improvise emergency scenarios to teach communication strategies that can—or don't—work. In the scenarios, a person with a disability threatens harm to a family member, goes missing from a group home, has a wallet stolen, or has a medical crisis while home alone.

Funded by two grants, Schoenbrodt and Leah Katherine Saal, an assistant professor of literacy at Loyola, recruit participants from local disability groups, pay them a salary, and work with them to develop their role-playing skills.

Why improv?

"Writing a script isn't really going to work. It has to be a real-life situation. They [self-advocate educators] have to understand they are role-playing and acting. They have to keep playing off other people to build the scene."



Mutual benefits

"We use standardized instruments and questionnaires with the police officers. We know from this feedback that [the improv] has had a real impact. Parents of the self-advocate educators came to us and said, 'We can't believe how much better our child is communicating. He's so much better at self-advocating. He's so much more comfortable and confident in front of people.'"

Self-advocacy

"When [the self-advocate educators] do the training, they stand up and present about their disabilities and who they are as a person. They help officers learn what kinds of communication features might be different for them."



Maryland mandate

"There are so many instances in the U.S. in which police didn't handle the situation correctly [involving some with disabilities] and the person ended up dying. There are so many things that law enforcement could have done before it escalated into that situation. So this training is really necessary." [Maryland mandates police officer training, the result of the 2013 death of Ethan Saylor, a young adult with Down syndrome who died of asphyxiation after being handcuffed by security officers in a movie theater.]