

# Law Enforcement Takes Part in Autism Training

By DELL SIMEONE

*Specially Written for The Westfield Leader*

CRANFORD – The Union County Prosecutor's Office (UCPO), on Monday, sponsored the first statewide Autism and Law Enforcement Training Program for police officers, criminal justice professionals and other first responders. The all-day program attracted 300 officers from New Jersey and beyond. State government officials, including as Attorney General Jeffery Chiesa and state Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick (R-21, Westfield), both addressed the crowd.

Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow opened the session by citing the alarming statistic that one out of every 49 children born in Union County is autistic or has a condition, which is part of the Autistic Spectrum. Mr. Romankow said it is inevitable that the role of law enforcement's interaction with autistic people will be rising.

The prosecutor then introduced Doreen Yannik, the Union County assistant prosecutor in charge of the Special Offender's Unit in the UCPO, which deals with persons with developmental disabilities. He said Ms. Yannik came to him urging him to address the problem of dealing with this part of the community.

Mr. Romankow then introduced Asm. Bramnick. Mr. Bramnick praised Mr. Romankow by saying, "Ted has a history of diverse experience. This training will broaden the approach of law enforcement in our community." He also said, "My hat's off to Doreen Yannik. Today, we're going to learn about the work you've done."

Mr. Romankow also introduced Janet Parmelee, superintendent of schools for the Morris-Union Jointure Commission, which educates students with Autism Spectrum Disorder at two schools, one in Warren and the

other in Berkeley Heights. Ms. Parmelee addressed the group and said, "Thank you for learning about our kids. Our parents now carry cards to identify their child as being autistic." She also said the parents' most significant worry is "after the school years and the behavioral follow-up."

Union County Sheriff Ralph Froehlich addressed the crowd and said, "From our side, the cop's side, how do you do the right thing?" "Many of these kids can't communicate," he added. He then showed the group what looked like a plastic wristwatch or bracelet, which is a tracking device used to locate a person with autism who has wandered away from home. The bracelet is called Project Lifesaver and the person wearing is registered with the county. Project Life Saver can also be used by someone with Alzheimer's disease, Downs Syndrome, or dementia. For more information call: (908) 273-1608.

Mr. Chiesa also addressed the crowd and acknowledged the need for the training in light of the recent findings of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) on the rise in autistic births in New Jersey in recent years.

The instructor for Autism and Law Enforcement, David Debbaudt, of Florida, a former police officer, author and lecturer and father of an autistic son, has taught this program to the New York City Police Department and many other police departments across the United States. Almost everyone in the crowd acknowledged knowing someone with autism.

Mr. Debbaudt's program's focus is about Autism recognition and law enforcement's response to it. The training is designed to give practical approaches and understanding when interacting with persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD.) The

object is to teach the participants how to manage communication with a person, who may be non-verbal, and to avoid confusion.

Mr. Debbaudt identified some of the behaviors associated with autism, which would help an officer responding in the field better appraise the individual when their behavior appears inappropriate to the situation at hand. He alerted the participants that some of that behavior would challenge their training and instincts. He emphasized the need to be calm, talk softly and to keep directives to the individual simple.

Mr. Debbaudt outlined a wide arrange of behavior practiced by people with ASD and suggested tactics to de-escalate dangerous or impulsive actions. The most important advice the instructor gave to the participants is to be patient, which may be difficult when responding to a field situation where time is of the essence and public safety is at risk.

Videos were used to illustrate possible scenarios of a police officer interacting with an autistic person who may be a victim, a witness or just a lost individual. A video, which was shown, involved a prosecutor interviewing a victim of sexual abuse. The details of the crime were brought out on the tape by a deft handling of the autistic victim by the patient interviewer. Mr. Debbaudt told the participants that autistic persons rarely lie.

He concluded by urging everyone present to get to know families with autistic children and to visit schools and organizations supporting those with ASD to gain an even better understanding of that community.

*Probitas Verus Honos*

## Blaufeder Joins Garwood Council

can't be looking to give no increases. It costs money to run the town. I'm all for spending money on the infrastructure of the town, but tightening the belt when it comes to anything else."

In other business, Mr. Mathieu, citing *The Westfield Leader*, raised the point that property taxes in Westfield are increasing \$90 per \$100,000 of assessed property value compared to Garwood's \$95. He noted that the median household income in Westfield is \$127,000 compared to Garwood's \$75,000.

"There's a lot of things I want to beat Westfield in," he said. "I do not want to beat them in tax increase."

He suggested the Finance Committee make budget cuts and talk to other municipalities about what they are doing to keep their taxes low.

Ms. Todisco responded that it takes \$18,768 in the borough tax levy to increase municipal taxes \$10 while in Westfield it takes an extra \$256,000.

Council members voted to reduce the application fee for a certificate of nonconformity from \$400 to \$200.

The council also abolished the recreation committee over the objection of Mr. Mathieu. The Democratic majority approved a resolution to amend the by-laws to eliminate the panel based on Mayor Pat Quattrocchi's suggestion that it duplicated the work of the independent recreation commission and was superfluous.

Mr. Mathieu accused the council of failing to abide by the by-laws by not insisting on a full recreation committee, and then again for eliminating it without due process. He and Mr. Blaufeder were the only no votes in a 4-2 decision.

Ms. Todisco announced the next meeting of the council on Tuesday, April 9 would include a public hearing on the municipal budget.

The council approved an increase

in the rate charged to industrial property owners for sewerage, a cost set by the Rahway Valley Sewerage Authority. The increase to \$2,781 per million gallons passed by a 4-1 vote with Mr. Blaufeder abstaining and Mr. Mathieu saying his no vote was a protest to the council for not investigating means to lower the cost.

## GWD BOE Budget

pays Clark a yearly fee of \$2,080,000.

The Garwood Board of Education budget includes a \$510,000 repayment of debt – \$20,000 less than last year. The savings comes after the bonds were refinanced.

In her presentation, School Business Administrator Janine Murray emphasized that the board wants to maintain optimal class size – an average of 20 to 22 students – and update the curriculum while keeping activities such as art, music, field trips, middle-school athletics and the eighth-grade play.

She noted that there were several budget efficiencies: creating programs to keep special-education students in district, sharing services with the borough and increasing premiums for health care.

Ms. Quigley said she is looking into additional sources of revenue, such as advertising on the school bus. She said she would love to buy all of the middle-school students Google Chrome tablets.

"Your textbooks can go on the tablets, your writing, everything," she said. "In two years, all of our state tests will be on the computer, and that's a different skill – reading a booklet and answering questions is a different skill than sitting at a computer and dragging a ruler to measure something."

School board members Christine Guerriero and Aaron Watkins were absent from the meeting.