

Alton Police Department attends implicit bias training to better empathize with community

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON – In Illinois, it is state law for police officers to go through implicit bias training every three years.

The Alton Police Department had such training on Tuesday in the conference room of the National Great Rivers Museum next to the Melvin Price Lock and Dam. It was hosted by Triken Consulting, a firm founded by retired St. Clair County Sheriff's Deputy and current professor at Lindenwood University's Belleville campus, Dr. Thomas Trice. Trice said his course helps officers look at their implicit biases and engage with the community with competency and empathy.

“Implicit bias training with procedural justice has offered officers the field an easier time dealing with their communities,” Dr. Trice said. “Officers are often treated better by the people they serve in communities with implicit bias training. The chief is the one who put this together. A lot of police departments nationwide are stepping out ahead of this, and the chief here is one of those looking toward that. It shows initiative.”

Triken Consulting operates around the country and trains law enforcement at state, local and federal levels as well as private investigators. Dr. Trice said they also offer polygraph services.

Alton Police Chief Jason Simmons said the last time his officers had implicit bias training was 2015. Outside of the state mandate, however, Simmons agreed such training is crucial for his officers. Several of them were there and they were joined by Simmons as well as Alton Mayor Brant Walker and Kim Clark, Walker's Chief of Staff.

“It's important we work toward better relations with the community,” Simmons said. “We need to get training so we can show officers can be empathetic while serving.”

Those implicit biases involved in the training are possible subconscious or unconscious biases against people for a variety of reasons, including race, gender, social class, economic class and a bevy of other factors causing people to immediately judge each other. It is important for officers to address and be cognizant of those biases while serving the community – especially a diverse community such as Alton.

Officers in the training spoke highly of its methods. Patrol officer Jeff Thornton said the training will better help him engage with the community he serves in order to explain to people why they enforce laws as they do. He added addressing such latent biases will also help foster better community cooperation, which in turn, may lead to a safer community.

“The class is to learn how to address un- or subconscious biases,” Lieutenant John Franke said. “We all have them, but this helps us see people's perceptions of a situation as well as helping us explain ours to them. This training will help us incorporate that into our daily jobs.”

Detective Kim Lutman said the training will help her recognize behaviors in order to catch and correct them.

“If we do things the right way, we have good encounters with the community,” she said. “It’s always important to have good relations with the community.”

Mayor Walker, who sat in for a large portion of the morning instruction, described the course as “a good exchange” and “tremendous training.” Alton Public Information Officer Emily Hejna, who also attended the training, described it as “not new, but very important.”

Some officers in that training were involved in talking to a man in crisis later that afternoon as he perched on the Clark Bridge threatening to jump. That training was re-emphasized by Chief Simmons after that matter was resolved.

“Our officers are highly trained in mental health crisis issues and care about people in crisis and in need,” Simmons said in a text following the resolution of that crisis. “This is just another example of officer training and officer empathy used successfully.”