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**VIRGINIA LAUNCHES NEW PROJECT:
DISABILITY AWARENESS TRAINING FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS**

The Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), in partnership with the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities (VBPD), and the Department for Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), has contracted with Niagara University to develop and conduct statewide training for law enforcement officers.

The primary goal is to provide the specific interaction skills law enforcement needs when they encounter individuals with disabilities. Funding will provide the development of a train-the trainer curriculum and stand-alone courses that address specific types of disabilities.

"I am very pleased that these agencies have committed resources and created a partnership that will enable our law enforcement officers to effectively communicate with and respond to individuals with disabilities during routine and emergency situations," said **Governor Terry McAuliffe**. "The result will be law enforcement officers who are responsive and better empowered to serve everyone within their jurisdictions."

Individuals with disabilities are often more vulnerable to crime and are two to three times more likely to be victims of violent crimes than those without disabilities. They also may have physical and cognitive barriers that affect their ability to access services and communicate with the law enforcement officers who are trying to help them. Law enforcement officers must be able to respond appropriately in these situations and it is essential that their initial interaction be helpful, appropriate, and safe while protecting themselves and the people they serve from additional harm. Specific high-profile events have shown how a lack of appropriate training and preparedness in responding to this population can easily escalate an incident. This training will include education on disabilities while

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enhancing sensitivity, honing response techniques, and connecting students to community resources and disability experts.

Niagara University has significant experience in customizing its training for individual state needs and has well developed resource materials and a web based network to help ensure the program's sustainability. As part of the training program, a train-the-trainer curriculum will be developed for implementation of an overview course. In addition, Niagara University will develop stand-alone courses that offer more in-depth information on the following populations: Intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities including Autism Spectrum Disorders, dementia including Alzheimer's disease, acquired brain injuries, including traumatic brain injuries, and mental health disabilities.

"Niagara University's First Responders Disability Awareness Training program is excited to bring its program to the Commonwealth of Virginia," states **David Whalen, Project Director**. "We are delighted that the Commonwealth recognizes the importance of sensitizing and educating law enforcement in proper, appropriate and accurate responses to individuals with disabilities. Our comprehensive training brings together the disability community and law enforcement to produce a Virginia-specific curriculum that allows for understanding disabilities, connecting with community resources, ensuring readily available information, and addressing matters in a constructive and positive manner."

DCJS provides leadership to improve the criminal justice system in Virginia's communities through effective training, partnerships, research, regulation, and support. It has long been considered a leader in the area of training for special populations. The VBPD serves as the Developmental Disabilities Council for the Commonwealth. Its mission is to advance opportunities for independence, personal decision-making and full participation in community life for individuals with developmental and other disabilities. DBHDS is the state agency that funds, licenses and administers Virginia's behavioral health and developmental services system. Its goal is to ensure person-centered services and supports that will enable individuals to live full and productive lives in their communities.

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