

LOCAL

‘Pull Over Properly’



Members of the Ridgewood Police Department offer guidance to special needs student drivers on how to respond during a traffic stop. Officer Sean Amoruso talks with Mitch Crane, 18, during a simulated stop.

Community initiative teaches new drivers with special needs what to do at a traffic stop

Marsha A. Stoltz

NorthJersey.com

USA TODAY NETWORK – NEW JERSEY

RIDGEWOOD — Lights flash, sirens wail, what do you do?

A challenge for even seasoned drivers, but what about new drivers with disabilities?

Resident Noelle Kokoletsos founded SpecWired to help young people with developmental challenges navigate life. Her latest effort was two “Pull Over Properly” sessions hosted by Ridgewood police for student drivers and the newly licensed with learning challenges.

“We run a similar program through the high school wellness department,” said Officer Anthony Mormino. “We come to the classes to talk about procedures they should follow when pulled over. It’s a little different for these students depending on their learning needs.”

Practicing in the Graydon Pool parking lot, students took turns having a po-



Detective Anthony Mormino of the Ridgewood police talks with Dean LaForgia, 17, during a simulated traffic stop as Natalie Morell, 18, and Jacob Scola, 18, look on. PHOTOS BY MICHAEL KARAS/NORTHJERSEY.COM

lice officer pull up behind them with lights and sirens, then approach the car for the standard “license and registration” request.

“One of the issues is multiple insurance cards stacked one on top of another,” said Officer Sean Amoruso, who also

participated. “And sudden stops rather than signaling and pulling slowly over to the right.”

Students attended from around the county, but “some kids may never get a

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license," Kokoletsos said.

"If they can drive, it's easier to get a job," said Kokoletsos, who credits Oakland parent Filomena Laforgia with the idea. "For our son, the driving skills were good. It just took him twice to pass the written part."

Kokoletsos' son, Mitch Crane, a senior at Ridgewood High School, says getting his license was the first step toward his goal of a commercial driver's license.

"I want to drive trucks," Crane said.

The importance of such sessions goes beyond landing a job. Traffic stops that go awry can put lives at risk.

Individuals with special needs, particularly autism, "are seven times more likely than their neurotypical peers to encounter police," said Gary Weitzen, executive director of POAC Autism Services, a New Jersey nonprofit that offers training for schools, police and first responders.

"Very often the interactions that go bad are with individuals who are more independent," he said. "It tends to be a hidden disability, so it's critical that the individuals earn to interact with police and the police learn autism recognition and response training."

In Ridgewood, Mormino urged par-



Officer Sean Amoruso of the Ridgewood Police Department talks with Jacob Scola, 18, during a simulated traffic stop. MICHAEL KARAS/NORTHJERSEY.COM

ents to help their students create a custom medic alert card they can carry with their license that advises the officer of any special needs, such as talking more slowly for those with audio processing difficulties.

Such cards are also advocated by Bergen County Sheriff Anthony Cureton, who said his office supports programming that is "designed to foster un-

derstanding between law enforcement and our special needs community."

"Our Community Outreach Unit partnered with Bergen Community College's Special Services to assist individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing with the creation of a Communication Card that allows sheriff's officers to non-verbally communicate during a traffic stop," Cureton said. "Bergen County is a

safer place when law enforcement and the community have the necessary tools for effective communication. I commend the Ridgewood Police Department for having such a program."

State Ombudsman and former Mayor Paul Aronsohn attended both sessions, calling it the "type of family-driven, community-supported initiative" most likely to bring about "much-needed changes for people with disabilities."

"I think this is a really good, really important initiative — one that could save lives and one that should be replicated in communities throughout New Jersey," said Aronsohn, who was appointed ombudsman for individuals with intellectual or development disabilities and their families by Gov. Phil Murphy in 2018.

"I applaud and am grateful to the parents and police officers who came together quickly to make this happen."

More resources

"Be Safe the Movie," a guide to interacting with police: besafethemovie.com/.

Information for law enforcement from Autism Speaks: autismspeaks.org/information-law-enforcement.

POAC Autism Services: POAC.net.
Email: stoltz@northjersey.com
Twitter: [@marsha_stoltz](https://twitter.com/marsha_stoltz)