

# Criminal Justice Academy introduces youth to careers in law enforcement



STAFF PHOTO / KARA WALSH

Youth interact with a Chicopee K-9 unit after watching a demonstration from Chicopee Police Officer Ryan Romano.

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HOLYOKE – Area middle school students learned a bit about what it takes to be a police officer on the beat, a federal agent investigating a bomb attack, or a cop working in the K-9 unit who uses trained dogs to ferret out illicit drugs.

The students participated in a weeklong intensive summer program called Criminal Justice Academy at Holyoke Community College. The course is part of the summer youth programs offered annually at HCC.

“We introduce them to what cops do when they investigate crime scenes and talk about the various law enforcement careers,” said Louis Barry, retired Granby police chief who teaches in the criminal justice program at HCC. “It’s more or less a basic exposure to the

criminal justice field.”

The students, boys and girls from area middle and high schools, investigated a mock crime at HCC (a make-believe murder that had them search for and decipher clues across campus), did a ropes-and-wall-climbing course as a team-building exercise, researched a possible law enforcement career they might be interested in, and met with representatives from different agencies, including the FBI, the ATF (department of Alcohol, Tobacco,

and Firearms), Amherst College campus police, the Chicopee Police Department, Massachusetts State Police, and more. They also visited the Hampshire County House of Correction, did some fingerprinting, and learned about forensics.

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**- John McKee**

“Louis Barry is the force behind this,” said Ken White, dean of community services at HCC. “He calls people in his professional network and

gets them onto campus to talk

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to young people. They can see that all of these careers require a post-high school education and realize how important it is for them to stay in school and get their diploma."

White said many young people who go through the summer program eventually make their way to HCC for an associate's degree in criminal justice and then on to a four-year institution for a bachelor's degree.

"The experience and connections of our faculty allow us to bring experts in the field onto campus who can really inspire our youth," White said. "It gives them an exposure to criminal justice at a young age in a way that they cannot get anywhere else."

The capstone event of the weeklong program is Field Day, which brings various law enforcement representatives on campus to talk about their jobs. John McKee and John Pijaca, special agents for the ATF, visited the campus with a vehicle containing specialized equipment that has responded to large-scale crime and disaster scenes, such as the Boston Marathon bombing and the Ghost Ship apartment fire in Oakland, California.

McKee said the truck is outfitted with equipment such as Sawzalls, Jaws of Life extractors, sifting tables, tents and other tools that can help save lives, extract bodies from rubble, and sift and sort through piles of debris in search of evidence.

"We are here to introduce them to the wide variety of careers they can have in law enforcement," he said. "It's not just about being a police officer walking the beat, a job that has gotten some bad press lately. We are here to show them there is so much more that they can do and that they can contribute to. There is a lot of important work happening in the criminal justice field and a lot of very good people doing it. These kids can grow up, get an education, and do some serious work in the field."

Ryan Romano, a Chicopee police officer assigned to the K-9 unit, demonstrated the skills of his German Shepherd dog from Slovakia. Romano said he got



ATF Special Agent John Pijaca shows the equipment aboard his bomb truck.

STAFF PHOTO / KARA WALSH

the dog when it was 14 months old and from the beginning, he was the only person allowed to feed, pet, and train the dog in order to develop a bond.

"I have a wife and two kids that are 18 and 15, but no one can really interact with the dog except for me," Romano said. Romano attended a training program to learn how to work with his dog. Police dogs are involved in searching for missing people, ferreting out drugs, taking down fleeing criminals, and more.

"Every time you walk around, your body emits little tiny invisible cells that are flaking off your body and entering the atmosphere," Romano said. "They are microscopic, but a dog can sniff them out. They have 200 million receptors in their nose, compared to the 5 million receptors that humans have. They are amazing sniffers."

Romano said the dog is trained to work for a beloved chew toy and the limited interactions solely with his handler allow the dog to pay close attention to his every command, which is critical when a crime is occurring. Romano

speaks to the dog in the Czech language, which is where he was initially trained as a police dog.

The dog can sniff and search out drugs such as heroin, methamphetamine, crack, and Ecstasy in vehicles, homes, luggage, outdoors, and on a person. Romano demonstrated how he calls his dog from the police car; the dog immediately jumped out of the car and ran directly to Romano's side.

"If I have to draw my gun to shoot, I want him right by my side. If I have to lay down, I want him to lay down with me, and if I get up, he gets up, too," Romano said. Romano then took an audience member's keys and hid them on a patch of grass, directing the dog to locate them. The dog sniffed around the grass and then quickly honed in on the keys.

The day usually ends with a state helicopter landing in an HCC parking lot, but that part was canceled because the helicopter was diverted to an emergency across the state. The students seemed excited by what they saw, nonetheless.

"I really liked it all, said Kelli Vey, 13, of South Hadley who has wanted to become a police officer for as long as she can remember. "It all seems really exciting. We visited the jail and learned about the work of correctional officers, which was pretty new to me and was interesting."

Tyler Cortis, 14, of Easthampton, said he became interested in forensics after watching the show, Sons of Anarchy.

"I definitely am thinking about this as a career," he said. "The ATF was really interesting to me, what they do and how they investigate things."

Noemi Vega, 14, of Holyoke, plans to attend Northampton's Smith Vocational School in the fall to study forensics with the goal of someday becoming a police officer or joining the FBI or CIA.

"I like the superiority of it and doing something to better my community," she said. "There is just so much going wrong out there and knowing you could be the one to help fix it and to help people is great."