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Building Bridges: Multi-Agency Collaboration in Supporting Disability Justice

A Joint Report from the Secure Communities Forum and the Global Law Enforcement and Public Health Association (GLEPHA)

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Executive Summary

"We police with the consent of the community. Our primary focus is serving our communities, making them safer places but also working with our communities, so co-creating and co-producing plans and strategies for how we make areas in our communities safer." - UK Police Officer (Respondent 20)

This report reveals how effective support for people of determination (people living with disabilities) requires coordinated efforts across multiple stakeholders. Through interviews with law enforcement officers from 11 countries, we uncover compelling evidence of an evolution in policing perspectives and practices.

The findings demonstrate a significant shift towards collaborative approaches, with officers increasingly recognising that disability justice requires coordinated partnerships between law enforcement, disability advocacy groups, mental health professionals, and community organisations.

As one Australian respondent noted: "I think especially in relation to mental health it is just absolutely out of control, the numbers and the amount of time we work with clients that have mental health issues. We're really struggling to keep up with the demand. There's a lot of work that needs to be done with agencies, with government, to work with people with disabilities."

This report, developed to help launch the GLEPHA Disability Special Interest Group, highlights promising collaborative practices and suggests structured partnerships between law enforcement and disability-focused organisations offer the most effective pathway for supporting people of determination in criminal justice contexts.



Key Findings

- **Evolution in Perspective:** Law enforcement officers increasingly view disability justice through a collaborative lens
- **Desire for Training:** Officers express strong interest in practical, competency-based disability training
- **Multi-Agency Success:** The most effective outcomes emerge from coordinated efforts across multiple agencies
- **Community Policing Connection:** Officers link their responsibilities towards people of determination with core community policing principles
- **Supporting Officers:** Law enforcement personnel who are themselves people of determination need better institutional support

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization an estimated 16% of the global population has at least one disability. Research consistently shows that individuals across the disability spectrum are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of crimes, making disability justice a core concern for criminal justice practitioners.

"Law enforcement agencies should prepare their staff through training and awareness campaigns on the needs of disabled offenders and suspects to prevent discrimination and ensure fair treatment. By ensuring physical and communicative accessibility and providing individual support plans and legal assistance, disabled individuals can understand and exercise their rights. Collaboration with disability organizations and adjusting detention conditions help ensure that disabled offenders are properly cared for and supported." - German Police Officer (Respondent 28)

This report examines how police across 11 countries view their interactions with disabled justice participants, with particular attention to collaborative approaches and multi-agency partnerships. Our findings indicate a shift in police perceptions and an understanding that disability training, accommodations, and sustained inter-agency collaboration are crucial for ensuring equitable access to the criminal justice system.

The Global Context

Defining Disability and International Obligations

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) establishes that states must ensure "effective access to justice" for people with disabilities. Article 13 specifically requires governments to "promote appropriate training for those working in the field of administration of justice, including police and prison staff."

Despite 184 states ratifying the CRPD, only 34 have implemented disability awareness training with police officers, of which only seven specifically included intellectual disabilities. This gap between obligation and implementation represents a significant challenge in disability justice.

The Stark Reality: Disability and Criminal Justice

The statistics on people of determination interacting with the criminal justice system are concerning:

- Police in the UK spend 20-40% of their working hours responding to mental health-related incidents
- The severely mentally ill in the US are eleven times more likely to be victims of crime
- People with mental illnesses were four times more likely to die from police use of force than their non-mentally ill counterparts
- Individuals with autism report that sensitivity to stimuli and self-stimulating behaviours were often interpreted negatively by police

Barriers to justice for people of determination include perceptions of unjust treatment, concerns about police inefficacy, difficulties with communication, and a lack of understanding about specific disabilities.



Transformative Partnerships: What Our Research Reveals

Our interviews with 16 law enforcement officers across 11 nations revealed four key themes that demonstrate the evolving landscape of disability justice in policing.

1. Desire for Training

"There are many different scenarios, and we have to be prepared for most of the scenarios. We cannot be prepared for every scenario, but for most scenarios. We need practical trainings, not just theoretical." - Hungarian Police Officer (Respondent 17)

Numerous officers mentioned a desire for more comprehensive education on disability, both during initial training at police academies and through ongoing professional development. In particular, officers requested trainings focused on developing competency, which aligns with evidence-based best practices.

A UK respondent highlighted how better disability training could significantly reduce the burden on the criminal justice system:

"I think that 60% of our prison population have ADHD that's untreated and undiagnosed, but would explain lots of their actions. It's understanding that, ensuring our staff have better training to understand why people react in the way they do, and hopefully, try and decriminalise a lot of the people that get put into the criminal justice system that don't necessarily need to be." - UK Police Officer (Respondent 20)

2. Positive Regard for People of Determination

Nearly one-third of interviewed officers referenced the need to treat all disabled justice participants with equal respect and dignity - without being prompted on this topic. This suggests an encouraging shift in attitudes within law enforcement.

- Some officers proudly described innovative accommodations, such as a Portuguese engineering officer who explained:

- "We don't use steps inside the building, and if we have to use steps we always have a platform or elevator... Another thing we use is the colours. We never use red or colours that can make people feel uncomfortable, especially when they are victims of violence. We always try to use colours that are neutral to make people feel more comfortable in the spaces."

- Other officers described community engagement activities, including one who takes people of determination and their families on police boat rides to "break down the barriers and have a good time while we're doing it."

3. Multi-Agency Collaboration as the Cornerstone of Success

"Coordination and multi-agency working is very important when it comes to offenders. You're working together, sharing knowledge. Quite often one of the agencies will have knowledge that is critical to the decisions, and how other agencies will react to the offenders. The only way you know that is when you share knowledge and work together. Information sharing agreements are very important when it comes to protecting offenders and high-risk offenders." - UK Police Officer (Respondent 35)

Officers consistently emphasised that successful outcomes were achieved through partnerships rather than isolated efforts. When law enforcement agencies work in isolation, they often lack the specialised expertise and resources needed to provide comprehensive support.

The research reveals that collaborative relationships not only improve outcomes for people of determination but also increase officer confidence and competence in handling complex situations.

A Croatian officer highlighted the value of NGO partnerships:

"If we have any problems with communication, we go to special services that can communicate with [people with] disabilities, especially with NGOs... The best [thing] is to communicate with them, and to also be educated about some special way of communicating with offenders in this category, especially if they have major disabilities."

4. Community Policing as a Framework

A significant portion of the officers interviewed connected their responsibilities towards people of determination to core community policing principles.

One Australian respondent noted that he helped develop training for 20,000 police officers on Aboriginal communities, which he stated experience disproportionate rates of disability and incarceration. Another Australian officer described how her department contracts with sign language interpreting services and encourages officers to learn Auslan (Australian sign language).

"We police with the consent of the community. Our primary focus is serving our communities, making our communities safer places but also working with our communities, so co-creating and co-producing plans and strategies for how we make areas in our communities in London safer. We police by consent without fear or favour." - UK Police Officer (Respondent 20)



5. Supporting Police Officers with Disabilities

Several officers mentioned the relationship between policing and disability, highlighting the lack of support for officers who develop disabilities through their service. A respondent from Brazil noted:

"Here in Rio we have a project, it's from the military police. A colonel has some disabled law enforcement guys. It's a very nice project because we have a lot of police that the state won't support. [The program] is a non-governmental organization." - Brazilian Police Officer (Respondent 31)

Another respondent described helping a colleague experiencing suicidal ideation after being mistreated by fellow officers because of his PTSD:

"I was able to speak to their senior manager and make them aware that this person's been treated really badly, could you have a look at it? Thankfully, the manager was a good friend of mine, and he looked at it and found out that the person was right. They had been treated really badly. I know that that person now has a completely different life and has turned a corner." - UK Police Officer (Respondent 35)

One UK officer who disclosed their own PTSD described the barriers to care:

"Even the support services they have today are overwhelmed. When I eventually admitted that I needed help and sought help for PTSD, I went onto a waiting list for six months before I could speak to someone. Police officers are seen as tough, but the reality is they're no different than any other human being. They put on a uniform and have training, but they have feelings and emotions like everyone else." - UK Police Officer with PTSD (Respondent 35)

Upon noting that he was our first respondent to admit to being a person of determination, this officer poignantly asked: "If your colleagues have PTSD and you work with them all the time, how did you skip it?" (Respondent 35)



Recommendations for Action

Based on our findings, we propose five key recommendations for improving disability justice through collaborative approaches:

1. Establish Formal Collaborative Networks

Develop structured partnerships between law enforcement agencies, disability organisations, mental health providers, and social services. This should include regular coordination meetings, shared protocols, and clear communication channels to ensure comprehensive support delivery.

2. Implement Cross-Agency Training Programmes

Create joint training initiatives that bring together law enforcement officers, mental health professionals, disability advocates, and other stakeholders to build shared understanding and develop coordinated response capabilities. This collaborative approach ensures consistent service delivery across all partner organisations.

3. Develop Integrated Support Systems

Implement multi-agency response teams that combine law enforcement expertise with specialist disability support services. These teams should have established protocols for joint assessment, intervention, and follow-up support to ensure coordinated care delivery.

4. Create Community Engagement Frameworks

Establish formal mechanisms for ongoing consultation with disability advocacy groups and affected communities. This should include regular forums for feedback, co-design of services, and collaborative development of policies and procedures.

5. Build Officer Support Networks

Form partnerships between law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers, and support organisations to create comprehensive support systems for officers who are, or who become, people of determination. This should include collaborative approaches to mental health support, accommodation provision, and career development.

Conclusion

This report reveals a significant shift in police perspectives and practices, particularly in their recognition of collaboration as a cornerstone of effective service delivery. The research demonstrates that law enforcement officers increasingly understand that supporting people of determination requires coordinated efforts across multiple stakeholders, including disability advocacy groups, mental health professionals, and community organisations.

A key insight from our study is that successful outcomes emerge not from isolated police efforts, but from integrated approaches that leverage diverse expertise and resources. Officers consistently emphasised how partnerships with disability organisations and other agencies enhanced their ability to provide appropriate support and accommodations. This collaborative mindset represents a marked departure from traditional policing approaches and suggests a promising evolution in law enforcement practices.

The findings notably diverge from previous research that has typically characterised the relationship between law enforcement and people of determination as antagonistic. Instead, we found evidence of genuine care, interest, and commitment to improvement among officers, even those with limited prior exposure to disability-related issues.

As we launch the GLEPHA Disability Special Interest Group, these findings provide a strong foundation for developing collaborative frameworks that can transform disability justice in criminal justice settings around the world.

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About GLEPHA's Disability Special Interest Group

The Global Law Enforcement and Public Health Association's (GLEPHA) Disability Special Interest Group brings together practitioners, researchers, and advocates committed to improving interactions between law enforcement and people of determination. This newly formed group aims to develop evidence-based frameworks for collaborative practice, share innovations in training and service delivery, and advocate for policy reform that better supports disability justice.

For more information about GLEPHA's Disability Special Interest Group or to get involved, please visit <https://glepha.com/special-interest-groups/>

