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WILMETTE LIFE

Wilmette village employees receive lesson in disability awareness



Wilmette officials recently attended a seminar on how to properly support and communicate with residents who have disabilities. (Courtesy of Village of Wilmette)

Karen Ann Cullotta Contact Reporter

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As assistant village manager in Wilmette, Michael Braiman said he and his colleagues have a tough time resisting the urge to help a resident with a disability who appears to be in need.

Now, Braiman and his co-workers at village hall, as well as the police and fire departments and park district, are better equipped to assess each situation with fresh eyes after recently attending a training seminar in disability awareness.

“I think one of the really helpful takeaways was to allow a person with a disability to first ask for assistance, which can be hard for people like me, who are trained to help others as much as we can,” Braiman said. “We learned that in some situations, you need to sit back and wait first to see if the individual wants or needs your help.”

Braiman was among the group of roughly 50 village employees who attended the recent seminar that was meant to build comfort and confidence when interacting with people who have disabilities.

Led by the nonprofit JJList.com Disability Awareness Players, the seminar featured interactive scenarios reflecting real-world experiences that public sector employees might face each day on the job, Braiman said.

While those who work in the public sector typically seek out the profession because they want to make a difference in the community, Braiman said, employees can at times find themselves ill-equipped to deal with sensitive situations.

“I was really moved by the training because it defied long-held assumptions I’ve had,” Liz Cox, a human resource manager at the Wilmette Park District, said in a statement. “Case in point, people are often so uncomfortable asking people with disabilities about their disabilities, and this training dispelled that thought process.”

The seminar’s leaders — most of whom are people with disabilities — urged village employees to use “person-first language,” which refers to the person first and the disability second.

For example, employees were taught how it is preferable to say, “the woman who is blind” or “the boy who has autism,” rather than “a blind woman” and “an autistic boy,” officials said.

Another key lesson — and one that resonated most with Braiman — is to allow a person with a disability to ask for assistance rather than immediately assuming help is needed, he said.

“Going beyond the basic requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the village and park district recognize that barriers to full participation in a community come in visible and invisible forms,” Braiman said. “The seminar was a unique and important step to breaking down barriers in order for Wilmette to be a community open to all.”

kcullotta@chicagotribune.com

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