

From the Office of the Sheriff: "In a Matter of Seconds"

Each of us makes hundreds of decisions every day, most after hours or days of careful thought, others more hastily after just a few minutes. How many do you make in a split second with an understanding that your decision can have significant consequences, including death? Where do you learn such a skill? Is it a skill?

Law enforcement is unlike any other profession when it comes to safety and the decisions officers make each and every day they work. It is the only profession in which an officer routinely responds to a call alone to deal with the unknown. Other professions are told exactly what the issue is so they have time to formulate their plan of action, assemble necessary tools, conduct research, or even have a solution before arrival. They know what they are responding to but not law enforcement and that is why we are vulnerable to Monday morning quarterbacking.

Daily, members of the Sheriff's Department respond to calls for service, some with a host of accurate information, other times without any significant or credible information. Upon arrival the deputy is confronted by a person or two whom share a recollection of events with the deputy that completely contradict one another. The deputy uses his judgment and experience to ascertain who is most likely telling the truth, compares the story with evidence and decides to make an arrest or determine an alternate course of action. This type of decision making is deliberate. Seldom second guessed, these are the most common for us.

We are more likely to receive criticism for decisions in which the deputy is confronted with a perceived threat. Examples include a shoot – don't shoot situation, whether to pursue a fleeing subject, use pepper spray vs. taser, or arrest vs. physically detain. These decisions must be made in a split second or the failure to act may cause serious harm or death to those involved. This is serious stuff and you expect each and every deputy to get it right; if not, citizens will gladly tell you how it should have been done.

Think about it. How much time do you take looking at a menu before you order? How long do you stand in the fresh fruit aisle before you select the perfect watermelon? How many decisions do you make in a split second everyday? Law enforcement does not have the luxury of time; we have no magical powder to sprinkle on our dedicated deputies to ensure they make the right decisions in a split second. We train, but it is difficult to train for each and every scenario that welcomes the deputy to a call with limited or unknown information.

Weekly we receive calls from citizens who wish to question the decision making of a deputy. Deputies come to work each day without knowing the number or type of calls they will respond to. As they should, they respond to each of those calls as if they are entering a threatening environment. They maintain that posture until proven otherwise. This is a profession like no other and I find it difficult for those outside the profession to question split second decision making of those in the profession.

Our staff reviews every use of force event and we base our future training on those reviews. Unless the action shows carelessness, total disregard to public safety or negligence, we must support the decisions and those who make them. To not do so will force the deputy to take a few extra seconds in his decision making cycle and it is those few extra seconds which will cost him his life. Thanks for listening, tnehls@co.dodge.wi.us.