

# The Feasibility of an E-Learning Program to Improve First Line Law Enforcement Responders Recognition of Emotionally Disturbed Persons

Bianca Lauria-Horner<sup>1</sup>, Brad Kelln<sup>1,2</sup>, Scott Theriault<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychiatry, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada

<sup>2</sup>East Coast Forensic Hospital, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada

Email: [hornerb@dal.ca](mailto:hornerb@dal.ca)

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** With deinstitutionalization, there are higher demands placed on police in dealing with “emotionally disturbed persons or EDPs” (e.g., those in an agitated state due to any or several of the following reasons: pre-existing mental health disorder; emerging mental health disorder; extreme situational stress; substance abuse). The need for training of first responders in the management of EDPs and/or those suffering from mental illness is well documented in the literature. We are evaluating the feasibility of an e-learning course which trains first responders to recognize emotionally disturbed persons and adopt effective strategies to de-escalate a crisis situation. **Methods:** Mental health experts and senior law enforcement personnel collaborated to pilot a program designed to improve law enforcement officers’ skills in recognizing, categorizing and managing EDPs, “*Recognition of Emotionally Disturbed Persons*”. Following a successful training pilot Dalhousie University Department of Psychiatry entered into a partnership with Canadian Police Knowledge Network (CPKN)—Canada’s leading provider of online training solutions for police officers—in order to provide a 2-hour online program available across Canada and internationally, currently known as *Recognition of Emotionally Disturbed Persons (REDP)* e-learning course. **Results:** The authors will discuss the feasibility of an on-line learning program, the benefits and challenges learners have faced over the 4-year period since its inception. Attendees’ satisfaction levels regarding the relevance and utility of this learning model was high. The REDP-e-learning course has proven to be a practical and useful approach for first responders dealing with emotionally disturbed persons. This model is a viable and cost-effective option especially in public service organizations where time efficiencies and reducing budgets are a priority. Organizations developing training programs for such target audiences need to take these factors into account in order to ensure long term sustainability.

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## Keywords

**Police, Training, E-Learning, Emotionally Disturbed Persons, Mental Health**

**Subject Areas: Psychiatry & Psychology**

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## 1. Background

Due to cuts to long-term psychiatric beds, changing attitudes towards community integration, and availability of better treatment options, the mentally ill are increasingly living in the community. With deinstitutionalization, there are higher demands placed on police, such that encounters with people described as “emotionally disturbed persons or EDPs” (e.g., those in an agitated state due to any or several of the following reasons: pre-existing mental health disorder; emerging mental health disorder; extreme situational stress; substance abuse) are likely to be considerably more frequent [1]-[4].

Unfortunately, adequate community services were never established to offset the loss of institutional services. Community crisis response services, (e.g., crisis help lines, mobile crisis intervention teams, hospital emergency services) are not always available particularly in rural areas, and mental health services continue to be underfunded despite the disability caused by mental illness as a percentage of disability from all medical causes.

Police have become the informal “first responders” of the mental health system [5]. They are often first on the scene, must often make an emergency assessment of family crisis, violence, substance abuse, unusual behaviour, or altered mental status, and function as a gatekeeper in deciding whether an emotionally disturbed person should be referred to the mental health system or the justice system [6].

## 2. Overview of National Police Training

There are 13 police academies/colleges in Canada which provide basic training/education to new police officers. Academies are either national (as in the case of the RCMP), provincial or regional (Ontario Police College, Atlantic Police Academy, Saskatchewan Police College and the Justice Institute of British Columbia)—or under the auspices of a particular police service (The Royal Newfoundland Constabulary RNC, Halifax, Winnipeg, Brandon, Calgary, Lethbridge, and Edmonton). Some police services (such as Toronto Police Service and the OPP Academy) require that new candidates first attend a provincial or regional academy then participate in additional training specific to that service through its own academy. Finally, some jurisdictions (e.g. Quebec, RNC) require specific prerequisite education before a candidate can be accepted into the police service or attend the academy. In Quebec for example, all police candidates must first obtain a college level diploma from a CEGEP3 (*Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel*, meaning “College of General and Vocational Education”).

New police officers typically receive information related to working with people with mental illnesses (PMI) through two channels; a curriculum specifically addressing the topic—or, there may be reference to working with people with mental illnesses in the context of other courses, such as in “use-of-force” training. All basic training programs studied include a component specifically related to working with PMI. The number of hours, however, varies dramatically, from only one hour (Lethbridge) to 24 hours (Edmonton).

## 3. An Identified Need for Training

The majority of first line police officers encounter the mentally ill regularly every month [7]. Encounters with people who could be described more broadly as “emotionally disturbed persons (EDP’s)” (those in an agitated state due to any or several of the following reasons: pre-existing mental health disorder; emerging mental health disorder; extreme situational stress; substance abuse) are likely to be considerably more frequent. Although most such encounters are resolved without injuries to anyone, when injuries do occur, the incident will often become part of news media headlines. examples of these types of tragedies are the death of Howard Hyde on November 22, 2007; a man who lived for 27 years with severe, chronic schizophrenia who died in custody after resisting and struggling with police several times who deployed a Conducted Energy Weapon (TASER) on two occasions [8]; in October of 2007, the death of Robert Dziekański, a 40 years old gentleman, who couldn’t communicate in

English, and who became agitated after spending more than nine hours wandering in the BC airport arrivals' area, and confronted by police who deployed a TASER several times [9]; and most recently the media reports of Sami Yatim's death on the night of July 27, 2013. He was described as being irate and mentally unstable, drew his knife while in a Dundas streetcar; police fired nine shots as well as deployed a Conducted Energy Weapon after he failed to comply with police demands [10]. Even in case where injuries and deaths are avoided, the difficulties of determining and knowing how best to manage EDPs' behaviours are the reality among first responders.

Poor outcomes are often attributable to the difficulty faced by first responders in correctly interpreting the causes of and/or intentions behind a person's abnormal behaviour. Police tactics developed for dealing with criminals, predicated on a rational response to the situation and police intervention may be ineffective, or counterproductive, if implemented with EDPs. When individuals are in crisis, they often experience a distorted sense of reality or make emotionally derived decisions, which in the encounter can lead to the negative outcome for EDPs, police, or innocent bystanders.

The need for specialised training in recognition and management of EDPs has been acknowledged by the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights Review of the Mental Disorders Provision in the Criminal Code. One of their recommendations was that federal, provincial, and territorial ministers responsible for justice should ensure that education programs on mental health are developed for law enforcement personnel, as well as other members of the legal/justice system [11]. In 2002, discussions between members of the Department of Psychiatry at Dalhousie University (DUDOP) and the Nova Scotia Department of Justice indicated a potential need for a training program in the recognition and management of emotionally disturbed persons. Mental health experts and senior law enforcement personnel collaborated to develop a pilot seminar program designed to improve first responder law enforcement officers' skills in recognizing, categorizing and managing EDPs. This project was supported by the Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada Community Mobilization Program, Janssen Ortho Pharmaceuticals, Schizophrenia Society of Nova Scotia, Dalhousie University, Department of Psychiatry, Delta hotels, Department of Justice, Truro Police Service, Cape Breton Regional Police, Bridgewater Police Service, Department of Justice Police & Victim Services Division, Amherst Police Service, Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Halifax Regional Police.

The training program would be targeted to law enforcement first responders (police officers, or other law enforcement personnel who may be first on the scene during a situation involving an EDP. Focus groups with members of the Department of Justice, law enforcement first responders and other members of the Department of Justice provided crucial feedback on specific course needs which helped shape the program. "*Recognition of Emotionally Disturbed Persons*". Following a successful training pilot [12], DUDOP entered into a partnership with Canadian Police Knowledge Network (CPKN) in order to provide a 2 hour online program available across Canada and beyond, currently known as *Recognition of Emotionally Disturbed Persons* (REDP) e-learning course.

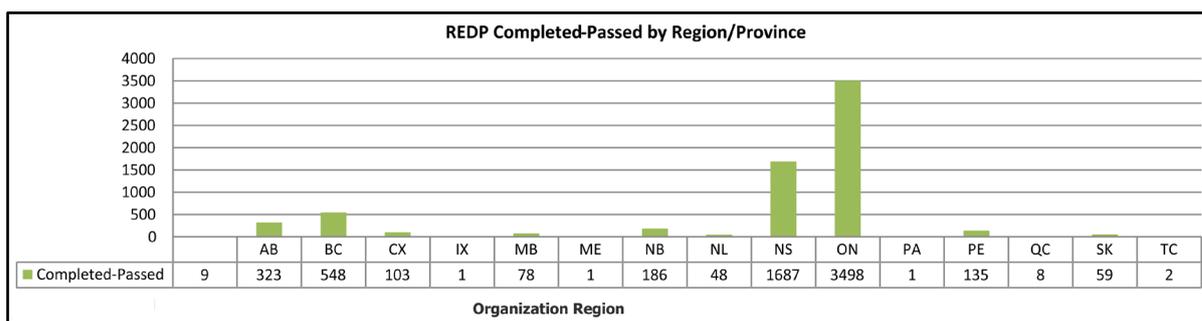
REDP e-learning course is the first E-learning program of its kind, which trains law enforcement first responders to recognize emotionally disturbed persons and adopt effective strategies to de-escalate a crisis situation. The delivery model not only eliminates training access barriers for geographically disadvantaged rural communities, but also addresses the current realities of public service organizations' restructuring with reduced budgets, time constraints and competing demands for training. E-learning programs reduce costs for participating agencies by maximizing flexibility in the delivery of the program and minimizing other costs, such as the costs, both direct and indirect of attending more traditional classroom based learning.

#### 4. Feasibility of the REDP E-Learning Program

Cost effectiveness and time saving attributes of training programs are important but not at the expense of compromising participant learning. REDP-e-learning program was first launched in March 2008 with over 6592 users successfully completing the course to date. Participants from various law, and non-law enforcement agencies such as police, justice, nurses, and counselors have taken the course (Figure 1); successful completion was benchmarked to a score of 80%, otherwise participants were redirected to the sections which required revision until the pass mark was achieved successfully. Table 1 provides an overview of top user organizations across the country. It is felt that this represents a fairly good representation of Canadian Law Enforcement Agencies' feedback on the course.

**Table 1.** Top user organizations.

	Organization	Completed-passed		Organization	Completed-passed
1	Toronto Police Service	548	14	Justice Institute of British Columbia	123
2	Peel Regional Police	2053	15	Nova Scotia Community College	91
3	Vancouver Police Department	100	16	Fredericton Police Force	104
4	Halifax Regional Police Service	711	17	Manitoba Lotteries	27
5	Correctional Service of Nova Scotia	485	18	Abbotsford Police Department	72
6	Ottawa Police Service	7	19	Toronto Transit Commission	76
7	Nova Scotia Sheriff Services	153	20	Halton Regional Police Service	66
8	Chatham-Kent Police Service	164	21	York University Security Services	5
9	BC Transit Police	160	22	Ontario Provincial Police	58
10	RCMP	116	23	Saskatoon Police Service	44
11	York Regional Police	94	24	Total Security Management	52
12	Atlantic Police Academy	131	25	Cape Breton Regional Police Service	50
13	Lethbridge Regional Police Service	124			



**Figure 1.** Breakdown of completions (6687) by province/region.

Thirty percent of participants (1997) who completed the course provided feedback via standardized on line questionnaires submitted directly to CPKN immediately after completing the REDP e-learning course. Collection of data was completed independently from Dalhousie University, Department of Psychiatry. The majority of participants were sworn police officers (57%). Other common groups were Law Enforcement Officers (23.7%), followed by the “Other” category (18.1%) comprised mainly of police cadet, sheriff student, dispatcher for police, counselor/youth worker, and law enforcement support staff, (Table 2).

Figure 2 to Figure 4, Table 3 and Table 4 provides a summary of respondents’ feedback on the usefulness of the course as well as feasibility of learning on line.

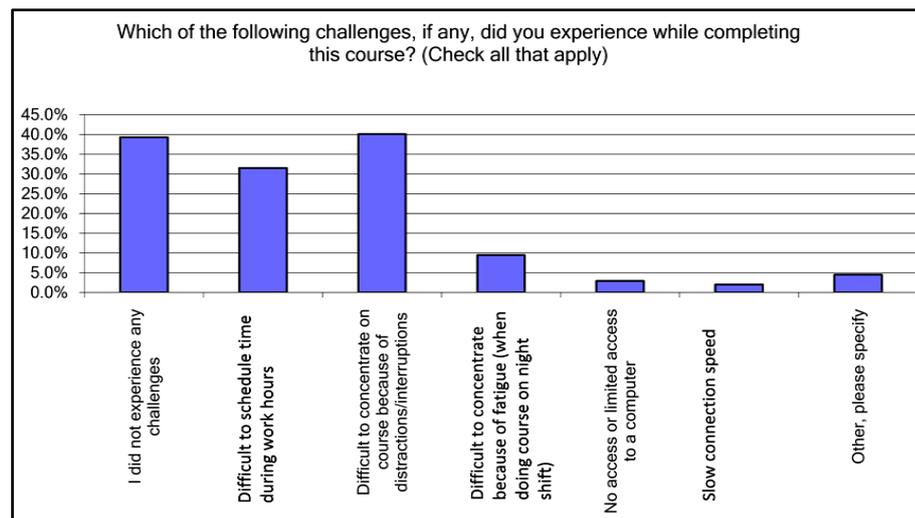
Participants were advised that REDP was an introduction to EDP recognition and response strategies, that it was not meant for officers to be able to diagnose mental illness but rather to recognize EDP common behaviour presentations in the field; not meant to replace the critical dialogue and assessment of the officer at the scene, it was to be considered supplemental to an officer’s primary training and does not supersede any standard operating procedures.

When asked to provide their overall impression of the course, some common comments were:

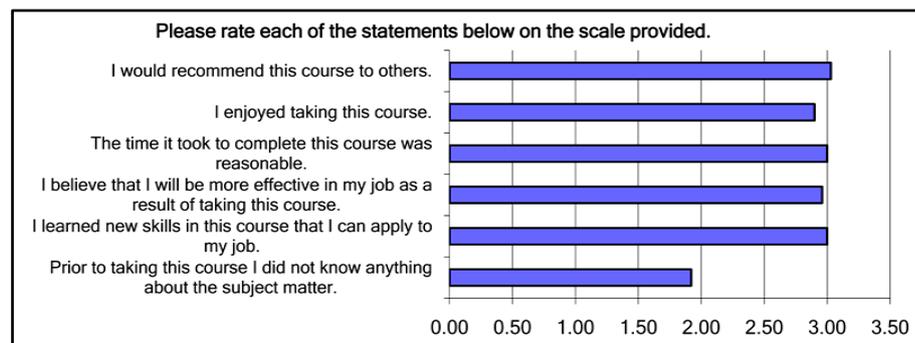
*“All law enforcement agencies members should complete this course”; “Participation should be mandatory”; “Great course and excellent support by CPKN!”; “Great overall experience and I most definitely learned some very useful tactics for dealing with persons with mental illness”; “Excellent introduction to mental illness and suggested strategies for dealing with potentially high risk situations”. “I liked the format of the e-learning, easy to navigate”. An excellent overall tool, user friendly, practical. The practice sessions are particularly useful.”*

**Table 2.** Participants primary role.

Answer options	Response percent
Sworn Police Officer	57.7%
Law Enforcement Officer ( <i>i.e.</i> , Peace Officer, Special Constable, Border Services, Corrections, etc.)	23.7%
Health Care Worker	0.5%
Other	18.1%



**Figure 2.** Challenges encountered for on-line learning.



**Figure 3.** Perceived usefulness of the course.

There were however challenges to on-line learning (Figure 2). Respondants could check all that applied. Forty percent of responders did not report any challenges. Forty percent experienced difficulties concentrating due to distractions at work. Thirty-one percent reported challenges of a time scheduling nature, 10% reported that they had difficulties concentrating due to fatigue, as most took the course during night shift, and approximately 9.5% reported technical issues: no access or limited access to a computer, slow speed connection, inability to print, difficulties registering, and difficulties with pop-up blockers. Interestingly a very few percentage simply disliked on line learning, and felt that the absence of class discussion was simply not acceptable to them (0.1%). Despite the challenges 91% of respondents felt that on-line learning worked well for them (Table 3).

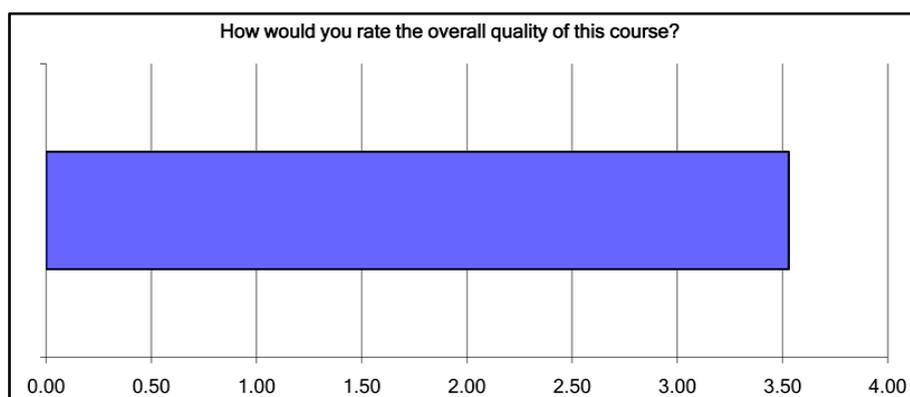
Participants were required to indicate whether they knew anything about EDP’s prior to taking the course, learned new skills they can apply in the field, would be more effective in their job, or would recommend the course to others by selecting among four responses on a four point Likert scale. Although only 16.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they did not know anything about the subject matter prior to taking the course, most

**Table 3.** Feasibility of learning on-line.

Learning online worked well for me.		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Yes	91.1%	1765
No	8.9%	172
If No, please explain		135
<i>Answered question</i>		<b>1937</b>
<i>Skipped question</i>		<b>60</b>

**Table 4.** Most useful modules.

Answer options	Response percent
About mental illness	44.9%
Mental health legislation	19.8%
Emotionally disturbed person	57.3%
Category R (reality impaired)	60.1%
Category A (antisocial, argumentative, abusers)	62.3%
Category ED (excited delirium)	72.2%
Category S (suicidal/depressed)	63.4%



**Figure 4.** Quality of the course.

agreed, or strongly agreed that they learned new skills they can apply in the field (85.5%), would be more effective in their job as a result of the course (82.9%), and would recommend the course to others (84.4%) (**Figure 3**). In addition, the overall average rating on the quality of the course was 3.5 (very good to excellent), (**Figure 4**). In the last year survey responses (2012-2013), many also commented that although training on dealing with EDPs exists, it is not necessarily available to all due to time and access barriers. This course provided a means to learn about the subject matter.

When asked which modules were the most useful, Excited Delirium Syndrome ranked first at 72.2%, and Category S (suicidal/depressed) as the second most useful module. Respondents were provided the ability to check all modules that applied (**Table 4**).

Overall learners felt that on-line learning is a feasible model for most (**Figure 5**).

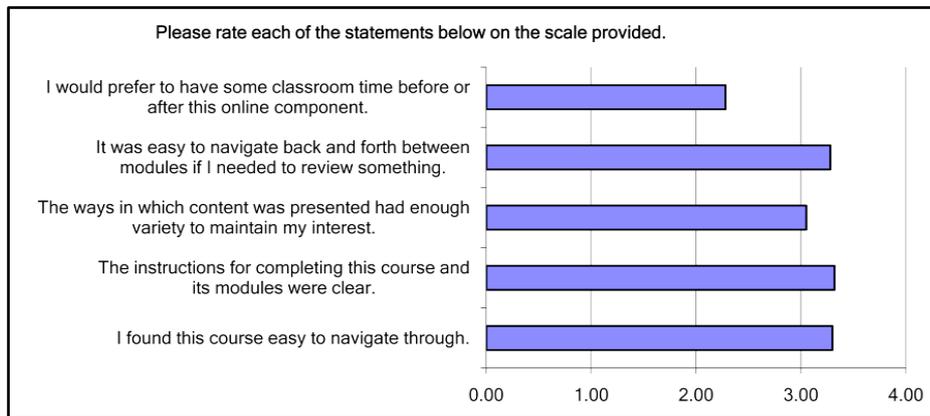


Figure 5. Feasibility of the model.

### **Nova Scotia Department of Justice Rolls Out Mandatory R-EDP Training to Corrections Officers, Sheriffs.**

In reflecting on the utility of the program, the Manger of Programs and Policy for NS Corrections—where more than 800 employees have completed the program, notes:

*“Given the prevalence of offenders with mental health disorders, ensuring our staff are properly informed and trained is a top priority,” he says: “We found the REDP course not only instructive on pertinent issues, but also easy to understand and navigate. The fact that we’ll also reduce training associated costs is just an added benefit.”*

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police is following suite and expected to implement mandatory REDP course training for all members in the early months of 2014.

#### **Dissemination to a wider audience; Private Security Guard Personnel.**

In 2012, due to high demand, DUDOP tailored the REDP e-learning course specifically for Private Security Guard Personnel which was officially launched September 2012.

## **5. Limitations**

There are limitations specific to an on-line training model. REDP e-learning course does not lend itself to an interactive dialogue and open discussions with subject matter experts as in a face to face workshop. Participants’ discussions with presenters of personal experiences, difficult encounters, or cases of interest would incorporate experiential learning with didactic material.

In addition the REDP e-learning course content is meant to be an introductory course providing learners with the basic knowledge to build upon with additional training. Although REDP can meet the learning needs for most first responders who deal with EDPs in the field, it does not meet the needs for more specialized teams such as the mobile crisis intervention teams, who require a deeper knowledge and understanding of various facets of EDPs and mental illness. REDP e-learning is by its nature, generic in form. Hence, its tenets may need to be adapted to the specific police, justice and mental health in specific locations.

## **6. Next Steps**

Law enforcement and first responder agencies have identified a need for a more comprehensive course on mental health and illness. For this reason, DUDOP will looking at implementing as a next step on a Tier II REDP e-learning program specifically for specialized teams, and/or officers who would have within their mandate a specific role which includes mental health and illness.

## **7. Discussion**

First responders are not mental health professionals, and should not be expected to be abreast of current trends in mental health or knowledgeable of the diagnosis of mental illness. An e-learning delivery model has shown to

meet course objectives in helping first responders identify and apply strategies to observed behaviours in the field, a skill they already possess and excel at.

The module reported as most valuable is consistently the Excited Delirium Syndrome module. One explanation could be that there is still very little known and much research to be done about this condition possibly resulting in first responders' lower comfort levels in dealing with ExDS. For this reason, the authors have revamped this section adding updated information to further help enhance learners' skills in recognition and management of this category of EDPs. The authors are exploring the need for a Tier II REDP e-learning program for more specialized teams or personnel whose mandate include mental health and illness with additional topics derived from tabulated feedback from learners over 4 years.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, an on-line learning program has its benefits and challenges; however we have shown that the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Organizations are seeking for programs which can be delivered at a lower cost without compromising learning. The REDP-e-learning course has proven to be a practical and useful approach for first responders dealing with emotionally disturbed persons as attendees' satisfaction levels regarding the relevance and utility of this learning model was high. This model is a viable and cost-effective option especially in public service organizations where time efficiencies and reducing budgets are a priority. Organizations developing training programs for such target audiences need to take these factors into account. Although the ideal training model may be a face to face workshop, and/or pre-workshop REDP homework followed by a face to face training session, the stand alone REDP basic training is a valuable option to meet learners' needs, the realities of today's changing organizational climate, and programs' long term sustainability goals.

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