

# Widener helps police officers learn limits of the law

Yann Ranaivo, *The News Journal*

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(Photo: *The News Journal*)

Two Widener University law professors are conducting training seminars to refresh Wilmington police on the Fourth Amendment, which generally governs when officers may perform searches, seizures and arrests.

Jules Epstein, who teaches criminal law, said the first seminar that took place at Widener's Delaware campus on Tuesday drew more than 70 officers, who the professor said "asked good questions and made good observations."

"Widener was asked to work with the department and do a refresher training on developments on the law of what we call search and seizure. When police may lawfully stop and arrest people, when they may lawfully search people. Things of that nature," Epstein said Friday. "Just like police officers go through refreshers on firearms, they can go through refreshers on the law.

"I will say this: The first one went extraordinarily well."

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The seminars, which the city announced this week, were offered by the city and the American Civil Liberties Union of Delaware. Epstein, who's conducting the sessions with his colleague, Leonard N. Sosnov, said three more seminars are planned, with the next one scheduled for this coming Tuesday.

Epstein said he expects police to receive a reminder of where the lines are drawn between legal and illegal searches "so that they're both protecting public safety and respecting people's rights."

Kathleen MacRae, ACLU of Delaware's executive director, said seminars such as the ones Wilmington police are participating in aim to keep officers up to speed with evolutions in the law.

"It's all about police and citizen interaction, and to make sure the police are properly trained and understand all the nuances of the law," she said. "There's always new court cases that are being decided, and new case law that's being established, and sometimes you forget. It's a big job."

Mike Lawson, former president of the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 1, said these kinds of seminars, which Wilmington police are no strangers to, are

generally helpful because police don't always know all the various interpretations of certain laws.

Lawson, who spent 23 years with Wilmington police before retiring in 2012, said participation also shows the importance many officers place on law enforcement and not deliberately overstepping its bounds.

"When you get those people who do the wrong thing, it looks bad on everyone," he said. "You get some bad apples in there, and sooner or later they usually get weeded out ... But you don't get to see the good that happens."

Lawson said seminars can be especially helpful to younger officers who may still be inexperienced.

"We can't just stop someone on the street. We have to have probable cause," Lawson said, referring to the police actions governed under the Fourth Amendment. "If someone complains, we need more information. We need a description of the individual, approximate age, race, clothing. We just can't say, 'Someone called in.' There has to be a reason.

"As a young police officer learns, you have to build probable cause."

Lawson, however, said he'd like to see the ACLU, or other groups that stage police seminars, do more ride-alongs to get a better understanding of the many challenges police officers face on the job. He said information taken from the ride-alongs could be very helpful with deciding the direction of seminars.

"They should come out and get a feel of what we encounter on a day-to-day basis," Lawson said. "We have guys who have been involved in gun fights. It's a battle, and cops have to make a split-second decision."

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