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Standoff between boy, Providence police ends peacefully

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PROVIDENCE — It was a recipe for disaster: an autistic youth, a knife-wielding fit, and a lunge toward an armed police officer who had responded to a house in Mount Pleasant on a sweltering Saturday afternoon.

But tragedy was averted, the Providence police say, when they finally persuaded the youth to drop the knife.

Lt. Daniel Gannon, the 7th District commander who negotiated with the youth, voiced relief on Sunday that the standoff didn't end as others in Rhode Island have, with mentally ill men dying last year following struggles with police in Pawtucket, East Providence and West Warwick.

He credits training that officers received a few months ago in dealing with the mentally ill.

"This could've easily gone the other way," he said.

At 3:23 p.m. Saturday, Patrolman Daniel Sirignano was dispatched to 43 Winthrop Ave. for a report of a 12-year-old, 250-pound, mentally challenged boy on a porch with a large steak knife.

The boy, who had wandered onto the screened-in porch of an elderly woman he didn't know, had duct tape wrapped around his neck and both feet and was wearing only shorts as he stabbed holes in the screen and in the front door.

Sirignano ordered the boy to drop the knife, but he refused and advanced on the patrolman, who "created distance" by backing away and leaving the porch, according to the police report.

Other officers were summoned to the scene, including Lieutenants Gannon and Michael Jackvony. Although they had guns and Tasers, the police were in no hurry to provoke a confrontation, says Gannon, content to keep the boy contained on the porch as they sought to calm him down and persuade him to drop the knife.

Their strategy was tested when the boy advanced on the officers. But Gannon picked up a lawn chair and held it between them, and the boy backed off.

“He asked why I did that, and I told him, ‘Because I want to go home at the end of the night,’ ” recalls Gannon. “I told him, ‘It’s too hot for this — let’s go get a lemonade.’ ”

During the standoff, the boy’s mother arrived from their home a block away, told the police her son was autistic, and joined the officers’ pleas to drop the knife. After 15 tense minutes, he did.

A short time later, however, the police had to intervene when the boy, refusing to go home with his mother, grabbed her by the neck and tore her shirt. Calming him down again, the police persuaded him to go to Hasbro Children’s Hospital for evaluation. He was not charged.

“It was the combination of experience, the mental-health training and taking some time to let things calm down,” said Gannon. “There are a lot of people like him who are getting arrested who shouldn’t be. It serves no purpose.”

On Sunday, the boy was back home with his mother. Gannon said that he stopped by to see them on his way to work. They were doing fine. The boy hugged him, and said he was embarrassed about his behavior Saturday.

“He asked me where his lemonade was,” said Gannon, smiling. “I’ll probably swing by later and bring him one, because he won’t forget.”

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