

A Guide to Street Survival Awareness

Presented by the United States Secret Service

The United States Secret Service has the enormous responsibility of protecting the President of the United States as well as many other high-ranking dignitaries. Secret Service agents are constantly put into dangerous situations, so learning how to survive a confrontation is key to Secret Service training. Because they know that disabled persons are more vulnerable than other people to confrontation, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) approached the Secret Service to ask for help in developing a program about self-defense for veterans with disabilities, a highlight for those attending the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic.

Former Special Agent Mark Camillo, who trained agents in self-defense tactics at the Service's training facility in Laurel, Md., founded the self defense training activities at the Clinic. The agency's own training program was adapted for both the physically and visually impaired. The longevity of the program demonstrates its success at the Clinic. This year marks the program's eleventh year in teaching Clinic participants these potentially life saving instructions. "It was our hope that what we do to prepare our own personnel for survival will be helpful to these men and women also," said Camillo.

The program is now headed by Special Agent Mark Copanuzzi, who is trained in controlled tactics. "This will be my third year at the Clinic," he said. "It is truly amazing to see the relationships that are fostered year after year between the agents and the participants." The program first teaches veterans to recognize dangerous situations, methods of minimizing risk and avoiding confrontation. "We talk about the importance of using a person's most valuable survival tool, their mind," Copanuzzi explained. "We teach self-awareness and how to use your imagination to remedy a potentially dangerous situation." Two sessions are held each year at the Clinic, one for wheelchair-users and another for the visually impaired participants.

Secret Service agents participating in the program continue to advise veterans to use everything they have to survive, including their white cane or the arm of their wheelchair. Veterans in wheelchairs often possess superior upper body strength. It is for this reason the agents teach them how to get an attacker to the ground while in a wheelchair. The agents demonstrate the maneuvers from wheelchairs so veterans can clearly see how to complete the move effectively. The program now includes much more hands-on participation. "We would like the participants to really take ownership of the class and not simply listen to lectures and watch demonstrations, but to actually get involved," Copanuzzi explained. While one class is certainly not enough, agents hope that what the veterans learn will help them survive in a harmful situation, and give them the incentive to find a self-defense program in their own communities when they return home.

As the only federal law enforcement agency that actively participates in the Clinic, the Secret Service is able to utilize its unique expertise in a way that benefits the participants. For the agents, it is more about serving the men and women who have served this nation. "I look forward to working with the participants," Camillo commented. "If there is anything that I have said or done throughout the week that has even put the slightest smile on a participant's face, then I have accomplished what I came to the Clinic to do."