Police add texting to crisis negotiation arsenal (Update)

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Police negotiator Andres Wells was doing all he could to keep a suspect from killing himself after a robbery and chase. But the man kept cutting phone calls short and pointing his handgun to his head.

About 10 minutes after the last hangup, Wells' cellphone chimed. It was a text from the suspect.

"Please call Amie," the message said, followed by the number of the man's girlfriend.

Wells was surprised. In three years as a negotiator with the Kalamazoo, Michigan, police, he'd always relied on taking cues from a person's tone of voice, the emotions. He'd never thought about negotiating via text.

"It had never even been brought up at one of our trainings," Wells recalled of the 2011 case.

With 6 billion text messages exchanged daily in the U.S. alone, law enforcement officers are increasingly being called upon to use texting to defuse violent, unpredictable situations. Experts say it's happened enough in the last five years to warrant new, specialized training.

But in Wells' case, he had to adapt right away.

"What do you want me to tell her?" he texted back.

"The truth," suspect Jesse Cook wrote.

While Wells ordinarily would rely on a skill called "active listening," he couldn't hear Cook's voice. Cook couldn't hear his. Was he yelling? Crying?

"It's not the preferred method of communication in a crisis, but if it's the only way that we have, then we'll engage," said New York State Police spokeswoman Darcy Wells.

Outside Buffalo, New York, in March, a suspect who'd shot at sheriff's deputies responding to a domestic call was carrying on text exchanges with several relatives when law enforcement negotiators got involved in the electronic conversations, eventually persuading him to surrender.

"He didn't want to talk as much as he wanted to text," Sheriff's Capt. Gregory Savage said. "It wasn't part of the training I got when I went through the crisis negotiator school put on by the FBI, but it's something that they are incorporating into any new training."

Red Bank, Tennessee, Police Chief Tim Christol includes texting in his sessions and has published articles on the topic.

"We're losing those verbal cues that we want to listen to to help us decide where this person is—if they're manic at the time, if they're in a state of depression," Christol said. "Words are only 7 percent of communication."

Wells used Cook's text about telling his girlfriend the truth as a way to show empathy and build trust. He texted that he understood the unemployed veteran was trying to provide for his girlfriend and daughter when he robbed the gas station.

There was no response.

A minute later, Wells typed again, determined to keep the communication going.

"This doesn't have to go down like this."

Again, nothing.

"Do you need anything? Water? Food?" Wells tried after another minute.

Finally, a reply.

"Water," Cook wrote.

"As soon as he wrote 'water,' I thought, 'OK, I can work with this,'" Wells recalled later. "We'll get something figured out."

Wells asked Cook to roll down his window so an officer could toss a bottle of water into his SUV, which was disabled by tire-popping spikes laid by police.

"This guy throws like a girl," Wells texted, fishing for Cook's state of mind.

"Thanks. He does throw like a girl," Cook wrote afterward.

Then a smiley face.

It was the cue Wells had been waiting for, proof Cook had relaxed enough to perhaps resume talking by phone, which had been the goal all along.

Looking back, Wells said having someone's responses in text form could be beneficial during negotiations, providing a chance to show them to a relative or another negotiator for guidance.

But the negatives, including the potential to be misunderstood and absence of emotion and real-time communication, outweigh the benefits, he said.

"Can I call u?" Wells then asked Cook.

"OK," Cook replied. He surrendered 15 minutes later.