

Criminal Justice Academy offers up-close look at justice system

By Linda Haase

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Want to tour a jail cell? Go behind the scenes at a 911 communications center? Watch how police body cameras work?

You can experience that – and much more – during the upcoming Citizen's Criminal Justice Academy. The free 10-week program, hosted by the Palm Beach County Criminal Justice Commission, is open to Palm Beach County residents who want to learn more about the criminal justice system.

The sessions – held from 6 to 9 p.m. beginning Oct. 17 – will include information about the criminal court case process, juvenile justice and local and state law enforcement. There will be more than 40 speakers, along with tours of venues including the sheriff's office main detention center and the medical examiner's office.

Speakers include representatives from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. Attorney's Office. The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office will discuss cybercrime and homeland security – and offer demonstrations and opportunities to see high-tech equipment firsthand.

This is the 30th session for the academy, which has offered thousands of participants an up-close view of the criminal justice system since it began in 1998, notes coordinator Rosalind Murray.

"I hope people will come and learn from the experts and then be compelled to dig deeper, ask more questions and challenge preconceived notions. We need citizen involvement," she says.



The Palm Beach County Citizen's Criminal Justice Academy is open to county residents who want to learn more about the criminal justice system. CONTRIBUTED

Sgt. Mark Wysocky, Florida Highway Patrol Troop L public affairs officer, a guest speaker at previous academies, says that participants discover a new perspective of his law enforcement agency.

"They see us in a different light. Usually when we have an interaction with some-

one they have been in a car crash or we are writing them a ticket. Our job is traffic safety, to make this a safe place to drive. That is the message we want to get out," he explains. "The academy tends to be pretty informative for people. After I speak, it turns into a question-and-

answer period and we talk about everything from the texting law to what to do if you get stopped and you have a concealed weapons permit and a gun in the car."

The program includes lectures, interactive presentations and several opportunities for questions and



The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office is one of the law enforcement agencies that participate in Citizen's Criminal Justice Academy, which is open to county residents who want to learn more about the criminal justice system. CONTRIBUTED

answers.

"Being able to ask questions is an important part of the program. This is a place where you can be candid and open and ask questions of the people directly involved," Murray notes. "Due to social media and TV crime shows, people are getting a very limited view of the activities that happen in criminal justice system," she says. "We are trying to dispel myths about criminal justice and help people learn about systems they help fund with taxpayer dollars. It's important for people to understand there is more than one side and that criminal justice is not black and white, that there are a lot of gray areas."

The academy, she explains, offers a chance for people to "build a factual base about those employed in this important part of our society."

It's also a chance for those considering employment in the criminal justice field to learn more, or for others who need community service hours. "Participants

include everyone from retirees to high school students," Murray says. "It's unique because you get to hear from and speak directly to these experts. It is small enough to be intimate, and it's not an intimidating atmosphere." Over the years, the topics have changed to remain relevant and current, Murray says. Topics have included firearms safety, crimes against the elderly, designer drugs, the grand jury process and crimes against children on the internet.

"We need people to be engaged, not to sit on sofa and scour the net and look for opinions they already hold. We need people to open their minds and get out of their comfort zone to learn and see and be a part of something way bigger than them," says Murray.

Due to space limitations, only 50 people can participate in each academy and registration for the program closes at 5 p.m. Oct. 14. For more information and registration, visit www.pbcgov.org/criminaljustice/academy/ or call 561-355-4943.