

First responders and their beliefs about communication
with individuals living with moderate to severe dementia

Celestina Vasquez, Dr. Maura Krestar

ABSTRACT

As adults age, the risk of developing dementia or related neurocognitive conditions increases. First responders frequently encounter older adults with cognitive impairments, making effective communication essential. This study aims to identify and quantify what first responders believe are the most appropriate ways to communicate with individuals with moderate to severe dementia. Using a quantitative survey distributed across various first responder roles, the research will explore communication beliefs and practices. Findings may reveal gaps in knowledge and highlight the need for targeted dementia-specific training to improve real-world responses and support future training development.

BACKGROUND

- The *DSM-5* categorizes dementia under **major neurocognitive disorders**, emphasizing its cognitive and clinical features (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
 - Dementia causes memory loss, confusion, disorientation, agitation, and behaviors that may be misinterpreted as criminal.
- Different types of dementia include: Alzheimer’s (most common), vascular, Lewy body, frontotemporal, Parkinson’s-related, and mixed types.
 - Frontotemporal dementia** can lead to impulsive or inappropriate behavior, often misunderstood in public or legal contexts.
 - Over 55 million people live with dementia worldwide, **projected to reach 139 million by 2050** (Alzheimer’s Disease International, 2024).
- First responders increasingly interact with individuals with dementia, often without specialized training (Fisher et al., 2020).
 - Many responders feel unprepared to identify and respond to dementia-related behaviors, especially in moderate to severe stages.

Research Question: Do first responders feel the trainings they receive are efficient enough to communicate with individuals suffering from moderate-to-severe dementia?

METHODS

Participants

- 24 first responders from the Kingsville and Bishop area took part in the study to assess their current knowledge and perspectives on communicating with individuals with moderate to severe dementia, 21 male, 2 female and 1 non-binary. As a token of appreciation for their participation, each department that held participants received a gift basket.

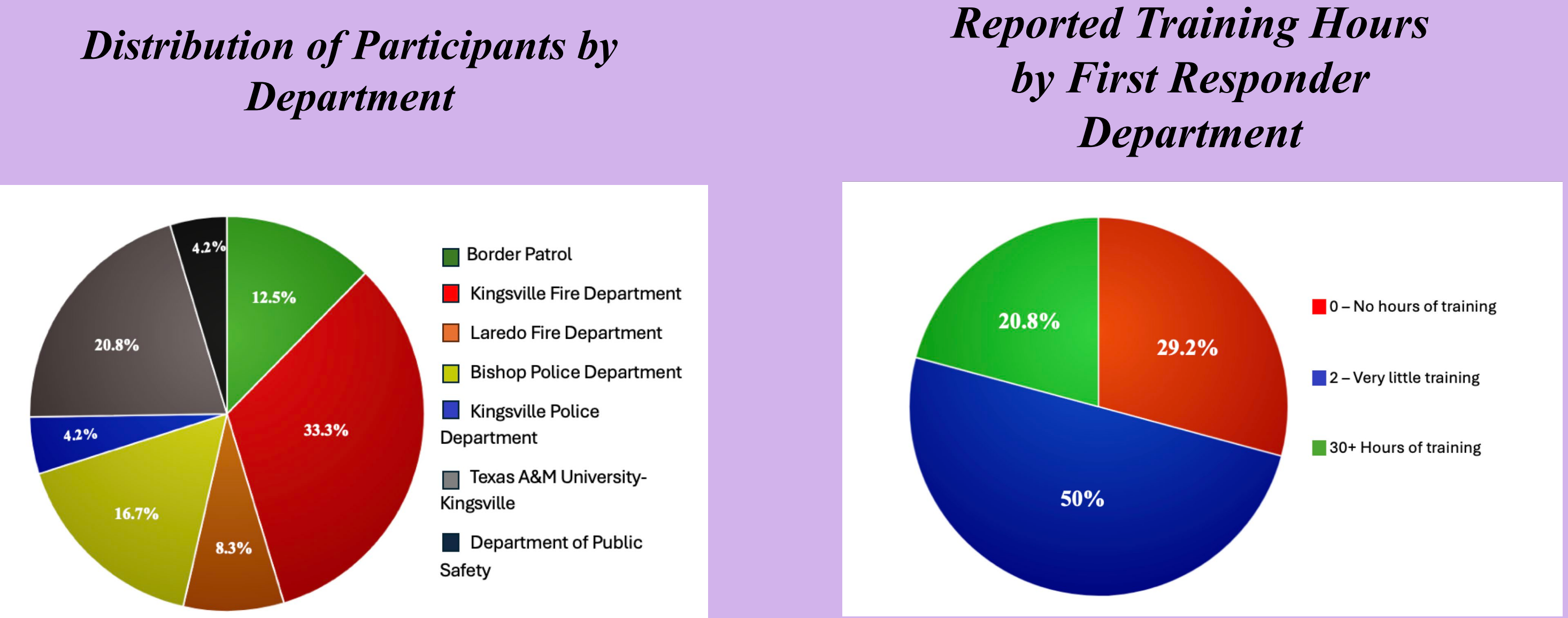
Materials and Procedures

- Participants completed a voluntary 17-question survey assessing their current knowledge of communication strategies, as well as any personal interactions with individuals living with moderate to severe dementia that were derived from Smith et al. (2011). Respondents answered open ended and Likert scale questions using Microsoft Forms.

RESULTS

a. Reports of first responder experiences

- Out of the 24 participants who took the survey, a total of 58.3% rarely to never interacted with individual’s who suffer with moderate to severe dementia.



- Figure 1
- Figure 2
- 50% of participants have received trainings they feel have been helpful when responding to real-life situations involving individuals with moderate-to-severe dementia.
 - 29% of participants have family and/or friends who have moderate-to-severe dementia.

b. Communication beliefs

“How much do you agree that...?”

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
How strongly do you agree that it is easier for people with moderate-to-severe dementia to answer yes/no questions compared to open-ended questions?	8.3%	20.8%	8.3%	37.5%	25%
How strongly do you agree that when a person with dementia is struggling to find a word, is it okay to ask, "Do you mean ___?"	0%	8.3%	25%	62.5%	4.2%
How strongly do you agree that if a person with moderate-to-severe dementia does not understand a question, should you immediately rephrase the question?	4.2%	20.8%	16.7%	54.2%	4.2%
How strongly do you agree that repetition is important in communication with people with moderate-to-severe dementia?	0%	4.2%	12.5%	75%	8.3%
How strongly do you agree that you should avoid using gestures in communication with people with moderate-to-severe dementia?	0%	33.3%	29.2%	37.5%	0%
How strongly do you agree that you should use visuals in communication with people with moderate-to-severe dementia?	0%	0%	12.5%	75%	12.5%
How strongly do you agree that you should keep conversation new and unfamiliar when communicating with people with moderate-to-severe dementia?	4.2%	54.2%	20.8%	16.7%	4.2%
How strongly do you agree that a person with moderate-to-severe dementia be able to read and obey a written command like "Close your eyes"?	0%	41.7%	16.7%	41.7%	0%
How strongly do you agree that a person with moderate-to-severe dementia should be able to write a sentence?	4.2%	37.5%	33.3%	20.8%	4.2%
How strongly do you agree that a person with moderate-to-severe should be able to tell you how they are feeling?	0%	8.3%	45.8%	41.7%	4.2%
How strongly do you agree that a person with moderate-to-severe dementia should be able to tell you what year it is?	4.2%	37.5%	33.3%	20.8%	4.2%

- Table 1 illustrates the variation in responses, suggesting that first responders differ in how they understand and prioritize effective communication strategies.
- Highlighted percentages indicate where responses were most concentrated, showing the most commonly selected importance ratings.

RESULTS, cont.

“How important is it...?”

	Extremely Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Neutral	Very Important	Extremely Important
How important is it to avoid eye contact when conversating with a person with moderate-to-severe dementia?	8.3%	8.3%	58.3%	25%	0%
How important is it to remain calm and relaxed when speaking to someone with moderate-to-severe dementia?	4.2%	0%	4.2%	37.5%	54.2%

- Table 2 represents participants responses using the Likert scale ranging from ‘extremely unimportant’ to ‘extremely important’.
- These findings highlight the importance of aligning training programs with strategies that are both evidence-based and currently under-recognized by first responders.

DISCUSSION

- Upon first analysis, most responses appear appropriate: however, further research is needed to determine what the correct answers are.
- Results showed that first responders varied in how they rated the importance of communication strategies for interacting with individuals with moderate to severe dementia.
- This variation suggests differences in training, experience, and understanding of dementia-related behaviors
- These findings support the need for standardized, dementia-specific training to help first responders respond more confidently and compassionately in real-world situations.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings reveal a wide range of perspectives among first responders regarding the importance of communication strategies when engaging with individuals with moderate to severe dementia. This variability highlights gaps in training and experience, emphasizing the urgent need for standardized, dementia-specific education. Enhancing such training can improve first responders’ confidence, promote compassionate interactions, and ultimately lead to better outcomes during emergency encounters with people living with dementia.

REFERENCES

