

EPISODE #5

Agency Spotlight: Blakely Police Department



Sensitive content advisory: This article contains descriptions of an infant death investigation and may be difficult for some readers. *Please read with care.*

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YOUR STORY

MEET Detective Peter Petrucci

Working as a solo detective at a small agency means Peter Petrucci carries a heavy load. For the last seven years of his 17-year career, he's been responsible for every case the Blakely Police Department can't resolve on scene: narcotics, fraud, property crimes, special victims. "It's like feast or famine," he says.

Instead of getting overwhelmed, he just gets to work. "I've always been a proactive police officer," says Petrucci. "Even in my patrol days, I was always somebody that went out and tried to make it happen." That proactive streak also pushes him to keep learning. To stay sharp, Petrucci looks for outside education whenever possible. "I take as much training as I possibly can," he says. "That's just how I am."

"I can't think of a more important investigation. We absolutely owe it to them to conduct an extensive investigation."



Detective Peter Petrucci
Blakely Police Department (Peckville, PA)



THE CHALLENGE When You Don't Know What You Don't Know

Unexplained child deaths don't happen often in Blakely Borough, but Petrucci knew one would come eventually. When he came across training on *Unexplained Child Death Investigations* offered through NCJTC, something told him to sign up, even though he hadn't had a case yet.

"I didn't understand that the type of investigation would be so different from another death investigation until I took this class," he reflects. "Not all of these child deaths are like what you would respond to in a normal homicide or unattended death. You have a family involved. There's a small child that many people love. You have to treat potential suspects differently than you would a normal suspect."

He admits he wasn't necessarily enthusiastic going in. "It just didn't seem like something that would be, I guess, exciting. But right off the bat, I was glad I went." He says the content was so compelling and helpful, everyone stayed in their seats during breaks and continued talking.



Hands-on learning opportunity during a recent session in the Unexplained Child Death Investigations training course.

TRAINING Building Skills Through Education

Petrucci completed NCJTC's child death investigations training and walked away with tools he hadn't encountered anywhere else in his 17 years. One stood out immediately: the investigative reenactment.

"I never heard of that before this class," he says. The technique involves having the person present with the child at the time of the incident physically walk through exactly what happened: where the child was placed, what people were doing, the sequence of events. It serves multiple purposes at once: it documents the account on camera, reveals inconsistencies and, when done correctly, respects the family's trauma while building an evidentiary record.

A Shift in Mindset

Another key shift was in how his department responds to child death calls in the first place. "One of the biggest things I learned was that the majority of child deaths should be investigated as unexplained, simply because they're kids."

A Shift in Procedure

Petrucci also brought practical tactics back to his patrol officers, such as the importance of designating one officer to walk the entire scene wearing a body camera immediately upon arrival, which documents the condition of every room before the environment changes.

He also learned the significance of checking bathtubs and water sources, something instructors said is a common element in many of these cases. "Patrol officers now, one of the first things they do is go look in the bathroom and see if there was water in the bathtub. I'd never heard that before."

Petrucci distilled everything he learned into a one-page document for his officers. It serves as a checklist of what to look for and what to do the moment they respond to a call like this. "That's what we like to do. One person goes to a class and can pass that information on."

*"You can do this in a way that's
respectful to the family, but still
conduct your **extensive,**
comprehensive investigation."*

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

- ✓ Established a department-wide protocol for responding to unexplained child deaths, distributed to all patrol officers
- ✓ Applied investigative reenactment technique for the first time, capturing documented evidence respectfully and effectively
- ✓ Preserved critical evidence through immediate full-residence body camera documentation
- ✓ Conducted a thorough investigation that cleared the family and earned lasting trust from the community



Photo courtesy of the [Blakely Police Department](#) in Peckville, PA.



REAL-WORLD IMPACT When Preparation Meets the Moment

Not long after the training, Petrucci's department received a 911 call about an unresponsive five-month-old. Patrol responded, performed CPR and revived the infant, who was taken to the hospital. The baby had documented medical conditions and a prognosis that had never been good. This was the kind of case that, in the past, would have been cleared as a medical call and never investigated. Because of the training, Petrucci was called out immediately.

Patrol, briefed on his one-page checklist, had already handled the scene appropriately, treating the family with care while preserving the integrity of a potential investigation. Officers recorded the condition of the residence on body camera. The family was respectfully moved to one room while the scene was documented.

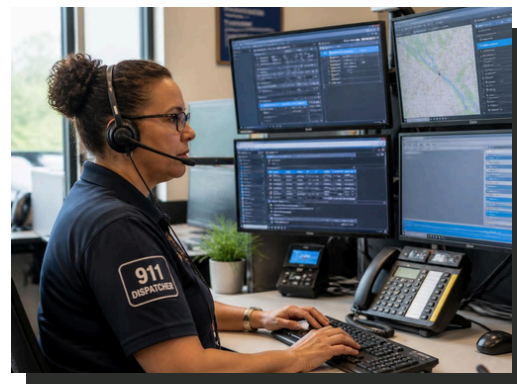
During interviews, Petrucci noticed behavior that, under different circumstances, might have read as suspicious. Repeatedly packing and unpacking bags, seemingly reluctant to go to the hospital; a calmer demeanor than expected. The training had prepared him for exactly this. "Our instructor Chris Kolcharno talked about how **people may look like they're having a suspicious reaction, but it could actually be the way they're reacting to trauma.** I took note of it, but I understood it."

He conducted a reenactment with the mother, asking her to show exactly where the baby had been placed and what she had done. Petrucci acknowledges he was nervous to have the conversation. But he says, "This class fully prepared me for that type of talk with the mother, father and the family."

Building Trust Through Tragedy

A few days later, the infant passed away. The investigation concluded that the family was not responsible. The death was consistent with the child's underlying medical diagnosis. "The family ended up thanking us over and over again and inviting us to the child's funeral," Petrucci says.

"To this day, we see the family and they thank us for our conduct during that investigation. The whole time I was investigating them, looking at them as potential suspects, I was treating them with respect. We were successful in that, and that wouldn't have been the case without this training."



Hands-on learning opportunity during a recent session in the Unexplained Child Death Investigations training course.

“Child death investigations are emotionally charged and complex, and how you manage these cases from the onset can make a difference in the successful conclusion of the case and finding truth and justice for all.”

”

Chris Kolcharno

Associate Instructor, NCJTC
Deputy Chief Detective, Lackawanna County
District Attorney's Office



Watch Detective Petrucci's full VIDEO interview
in Ep. 05 of the *Tell Us Your Story* series!

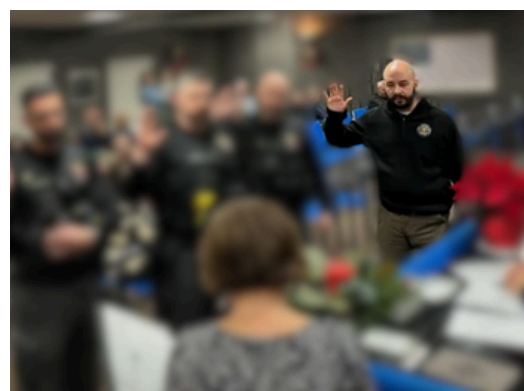
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DIG DEEPER What Worked for Blakely Police Department

Detective Petrucci credits NCJTC's instructors not just for the content, but for the conviction behind it. "You could tell in the class that the instructors were **extremely passionate about what they teach**. You get a vibe from a class: does the instructor really care? Is it out-of-date information from something they did 25 years ago? I felt that the instructors were dealing with these types of cases now, or recently, and could give you that perspective for today."

Petrucci says there's a multiplier effect in proactive training: one detective gets better, shares what he or she learned, then every patrol officer goes to their next call differently. "In law enforcement, we do a great job of helping each other — and in turn, helping the people we serve."



Det. Petrucci as he's being sworn in as a Detective by Blakely mayor, Jeanette Acciare-Mariani. Photo courtesy of [The Times Tribune](#).



More on the
[Unexplained Child
Death Investigations](#)*
course



Learn more about the
Blakely Police
Department [here](#)



More on ChildLine -
Pennsylvania's 24/7
[reporting hotline](#)

*The Conducting Unexplained Child Death Investigations course is made possible with funding awarded under the Missing and Exploited Children Training and Technical Assistance Program provided by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.