

Instructor Biographies

1. John Elizarde (Office of the Inspector General) – Human Trafficking 101

Sgt. John Elizarde was employed with the Texas Attorney General's Office from 2002-2019. During that time, Sgt. John Elizarde worked in the Crime Victim's Services Division, Executive Administration and the Criminal Investigations Division (CID). Within CID, Sgt. John Elizarde was assigned to the Special Investigations Unit. In this unit Sgt. John Elizarde conducted human trafficking and various other types of criminal investigations. Sgt. John Elizarde has presented human trafficking/child exploitation training to over 3,500 law enforcement personnel. In 2014, Sgt. John Elizarde was a Texas Officer of the Year nominee, at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children Awards. Sgt. John Elizarde has testified in District Court, as a subject matter expert on the topic of human trafficking, related victim/suspect characteristics and the trafficking processes, to include terminology. In December 2019, Sgt. John Elizarde joined the Jonestown Police Department, as an Investigator. In December 2021 Sgt. John Elizarde joined the Office of Inspector General – TJJD. Sgt. John Elizarde holds a Bachelor of Business Administration and a Master Peace Officer Proficiency Certification. Sgt. John Elizarde is a volunteer for the Texas Law Enforcement Peer Network, holds a Mental Health Officer certification, and is currently enrolled in a Clinical Counseling Master's Program.

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2. Brent Puente (Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission) – TABC Operations & Involvement of Minors

Mr. Brent Puente started his law enforcement career as a Jailer with the Willacy County Sheriff's Department in 1995 and was promoted to Deputy Sheriff in 1998. In 2002, he left the sheriff's department to pursue a career as an Agent with the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission.

He has been employed with the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission since February 2002 and has advanced knowledge pertaining to the Alcoholic Beverage Code. During his career, he has instructed numerous courses regarding basic liquor law to police officers and police cadets.

He was assigned to the Houston Office and primarily worked protest, breach, and subterfuge investigations until granted a transfer to the Weslaco Office in 2003. He worked as an undercover Agent for approximately 1 year and investigated cases involving drugs, prostitution, intoxication, and age-related offenses. He continued his career at the Weslaco Office working as a field Agent until promoted to Sergeant in 2015, supervising the Laredo Office and Weslaco Office. In 2022, he was promoted to Lieutenant and now oversees operations from the Rio Grande Valley, Laredo, and Corpus Christi areas respectively.

3. Katie Alexander (Texas Law Enforcement Liaison) – Distracted Driving

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Katie Alexander is a Law Enforcement Liaison with the Texas Municipal Police Association, bringing over 20 years of dedicated experience in law enforcement. She began her career in Montgomery County, Texas, after graduating from the Police Academy in 2003, and she remains actively commissioned with the City of Oak Ridge North Police Department. Throughout her career, Katie has focused on public safety, particularly in traffic safety and education.

Her expertise extends beyond Texas, where she provides traffic safety training at both state and national levels, supporting her fellow officers and enhancing community safety. Katie holds a Bachelors degree in Criminal Justice and a Masters in Psychology and is currently completing her PhD in Psychology.

4. Nelda Rodriguez (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley) – Whose Mental Health Problem is it Anyway?

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Professor Nelda Mendoza Rodriguez is a Clinical Professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees in social work from Pan American University and the University of Texas Pan American, which is now part of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Nelda has accumulated 36 years of experience in the field of social work, working in diverse settings such as child welfare, community family programs, mental health, and healthcare, and currently in postsecondary academia. Additionally, she is currently pursuing a Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas.

Professor Rodriguez has held leadership positions in social work and interdisciplinary professions, including roles at Child Protective Services and Lutheran Social Services of the South Inc. She has been an active member of two community boards, namely the Cameron County Mental Health Task Force and 211 since 2016.

Professor Rodriguez has conducted training sessions both independently and with colleagues on various topics, such as self-care and ethics, social-emotional learning, ethics in supervisor practices, and child abuse/neglect. She also presented at the CSWE Annual Program Meeting in 2019 on the topic of Latina Daughters: Assigned Roles and Responsibilities Regarding Caregiving, in collaboration with her colleagues. Nelda has co-authored two publications with colleagues and has been involved in collaborative efforts with university-sponsored grants, as well as with community agencies to secure grants for implementing community-based programs. In her role as Director of Field Education (2014-2024), Professor Rodriguez has worked closely with the School of Social Work to participate in international collaborations addressing immigration concerns and disparities identified through research and capacity building. Her research interests encompass international social work, community program assessment/intervention, school social work, families, and children.

5. Erin Espinosa (Evident Change) – Pathways to Desistance: Navigating Girls' Journeys Through Gang Association and Trafficking Risks

Erin M. Espinosa, PhD is a leading researcher in criminal justice, child welfare, and mental health. As Director of Research at Evident Change, she spearheads a team dedicated to improving outcomes for system-impacted individuals. Her work consistently bridges the

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gap between rigorous research and practice, actionable policies, making her a valued collaborator for government agencies, non-profits, and academic institutions alike. With over twenty-five years of experience, Dr. Espinosa has authored numerous peer-reviewed publications and presented at international conferences on topics such as gender-specific risk factors, trauma-informed approaches, and innovative diversion strategies for justice-involved youth. Her expertise in implementation science and data-driven decision-making has been instrumental in shaping juvenile justice and child welfare reforms across the United States. Dr. Espinosa's ability to translate complex research findings into engaging, accessible presentations has made her a sought-after speaker and trainer. As a recipient of the Stella Mullins Champion for Children's Mental Health Award and a member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers, Dr. Espinosa brings both academic rigor and practical skills to her work. Her commitment to improving outcomes for vulnerable youth and her innovative approaches to research and implementation make her an invaluable voice in the field of juvenile justice and child welfare.

6. Michelle Hallock (Fort Bend County Juvenile Probation Department) – A Deeper Understanding of the LGBT+ Community

Michelle Hallock currently works for the Fort Bend County Juvenile Probation Department as the Department Trainer, Investigator, and Compliance Officer. Prior to becoming a Trainer, Michelle obtained her Bachelor's Degree in Public Administration from the

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California State University of Fullerton and her Master's Degree in Business Administration from the University of Phoenix – West Campus.

Michelle has been trained as a trainer since 2013, and trains multiple topics for all juvenile justice personnel, and other agencies. Michelle has served as a Regional Training Officer for the Correctional Management Institute of Texas (CMIT) since 2016 and sat on the HERO Committee to help end homelessness for LGBT+ youth. Michelle has proudly served in the juvenile justice profession for over 10 years where her knowledge includes experience working with juveniles in secured facilities, as well as at-home in the community while on probation.

Michelle is dual certified as a Probation Officer and Supervision Officer in Texas and has the ability to train others in specific topics. These topics include: Train the Trainer, Handle with Care, Trauma Informed Care, CPR/First Aid, Towards Equity (SOGIE/LGBT+), Basic Officer Academy, PAX Tools, Thinking for a Change, Youth Mental Health First Aid, and Trust-Based Relational Intervention.

7. Sharee Traskauskas (Licensed Professional Counselor) – Mindfulness & The Benefits of Laughter Yoga

Sharee Traskauskas LPC, a compassionate counselor deeply committed to supporting individuals on their journey towards mental wellness. She is currently living out her dreams by running a private practice. Sharee started out her mental health career with Juvenile Probation and through her work, strived to create a positive impact, offering guidance, understanding, and encouragement to those in need. Her passion for mental wellness drives her to empower individuals to lead fulfilling lives, free from the constraints

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of mental health challenges. Sharee believes in empowering clients to chart their own path towards resilience and emphasizing true autonomy in the therapeutic process, fostering a safe space for growth and healing.

8. Sgt. Jesus Sanchez (Harlingen Police Department) – Civilian Response to Active Shooter

Sergeant Jesse Sanchez is employed by the Harlingen Police Department as a Master Police Officer. He has over 18 years of experience in law enforcement. His work experience includes Patrol Officer, Field Training Officer, Crimes Against Property Detective, Crime Scene Investigator, Narcotics Investigator, Homeland Security Investigations Task Force Officer and a certified TCOLE Instructor.

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Sergeant Sanchez is currently assigned to the Harlingen Police Department Training / Personnel Division as a Training Coordinator. The Training Division responsibilities consist of coordinating training and reporting for the Harlingen Police Department. Sergeant Sanchez is also currently assigned to the SWAT Team as the Assistant SWAT Commander.

9. Dr. Anette Escamilla (Our Lady of the Lake University) – Conflict Management in the Workplace

Dr. Anette Escamilla is an adjunct instructor at Our Lady at the Lake University, RGV. She is a retired federal probation officer who worked for 9 1/2 years in Hidalgo County at the federal building under the supervision of two federal judges. She transferred to the Brownsville division in 2008 and finished her career in Cameron County, under the supervision of four federal judges. She retired two years ago, after 25 years of service.

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10. Sgt. Cindy Paz (Brownsville ISD Police Department) – School Safety Procedures & Chapter 37 Requirements

Sergeant Cindy Paz was born and raised in Brownsville, Texas, and is a proud graduate of Lopez High School, class of 2004. Prior to becoming a Police Officer, Sgt. Paz worked several customer service-related jobs. Sgt. Paz has been a Police Officer for 13 years and began her career in Law Enforcement in September of 2011 when she joined the South Padre Island Police Department as a Reserve/ Part-time Officer for about two years before moving to Brownsville ISD.

Currently, Sgt. Paz is employed with the Brownsville ISD Police Department where she has served for approximately 11 years. Sgt. Paz was promoted to the rank of Sergeant in 2019 and served as an SBLE Sergeant. Sgt. Paz has served her department in various

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capacities including Patrol, Special Programs Coordinator, Emergency Management Coordinator, Law Enforcement Liaison, Crime Stoppers Coordinator, Public Information, School-Based Law Enforcement Supervisor, Communication Supervisor, and Records Unit Supervisor.

11. Dedrick Wimberly (Texas Highway Patrol) – Interdiction for the Protection of Children

Sergeant (Sgt) Dedrick J. Wimberly began his career with the Texas Department of Public Safety in January 2013 and is currently serving in the Texas Highway Patrol service in the Capitol Region, Capitol – Detail in Austin, TX. Sgt Wimberly completed the TCOLE Basic Instructor Certification in May of 2017. Sgt Wimberly completed the Interdiction for the Protection of Children (IPC) Train the Trainer course in February of 2018. Sgt Wimberly also assists the Department in instructing the IPC curriculum. Sgt Wimberly has self-initiated IPC cases and assists local investigating agencies with IPC related investigations. Sgt Wimberly has received the Department's Missing and Exploited Children Award and the Field Major's Award for his efforts in the Interdiction for the Protection of Children.

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12. Rene Garza (Assistant District Attorney) – Diversion Programs for Juveniles and Adults

Mr. Rene Garza is currently a Prosecutor for all five Diversion Courts in Cameron County, the Adult Drug Court, the Veteran's Court, The Adult Mental Health Court, The Young Offender Court and the Juvenile Diversion Program known as the A.C.T. (Accountability Creates Trust). He has been with the County going on 20 years as a Prosecutor. He is a graduate of Loyola New Orleans Undergrad and Law School. He is currently a Special Administrative Assistant District Attorney assigned to Juvenile Prosecution, The DA's Grant Manager, Diversion Court Prosecutor, and general all around "Take Care of it Guy".

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13. Gustavo Grajales

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14. Christine Chizek (Valley Regional Medical Center) – Generations in the Workplace

Chris Chizek is the Market Director of Professional Development for Valley Regional Medical Center and Rio Grande Regional Hospital. Chris is a registered nurse with over 33 years of experience as an educator, leader, and clinician specializing in emergency nursing and clinical education. In addition to her role with HCA, Chris is actively involved with the American Heart Association (AHA) and the Emergency Nurses Association (ENA). In 2015 and 2018, she received the Texas ENA Nursing Education Award for her work with training professionals and community members in the Rio Grande Valley. In 2024, Chris and local colleagues the Texas ENA Team Award for their Pediatric Mental Health conference. Chris loves riding horses and team roping with her husband when not working.