

Use of Force Simulation Training: The Key to Risk Reduction

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As risk management professionals, we are constantly attempting to devise ways to manage the exposures inherent in high risk law enforcement activities. Among our greatest concerns is management of the use of force.

Many agencies view the firearm as the most dangerous implement utilized, and its use the most dangerous activity undertaken, by police. The simple fact is, however, that in most jurisdictions, use of less-than-lethal force leads to a much greater frequency of incidents, and a proportionally higher potential for severity.

In the experience of one large midwestern Pool, excessive force claims comprised approximately seventeen percent of all police related liability claims, resulting in sixteen percent (\$4 million) of police losses incurred. Frequency of shooting incidents represented only two percent of police related claims. While individual shooting claims may be more costly, on average, it's clear that less-than-lethal excessive force claims harbor a greater potential for loss, as each claim could result in a high dollar loss.

Reviewing Worker's Compensation claims for many of the same law enforcement agencies indicates a similar finding. With approximately 5,000 claims being reported each year, roughly 1,300 are law enforcement related. About one-half (or 600+ claims) result from injuries sustained while attempting an arrest. Over the past ten years, these figures for officers injured during arrest situations are believed to be approximately \$14 million dollars, as a result of about 5,000 claims.

Clearly Officers are being injured, and are causing litigation, during the use of force. It stands to reason that much of this exposure is as a result of frequent, less-than-lethal, activity. Any mechanism that aids in the management of this risk will lead to significant savings from both an officer safety and a liability reduction perspective.

THE KEY TO CONTROL

Training is the key to controlling the risk associated with the use of force. While many officers are trained to some degree, most have minimal training where it counts, in the critical decision-making and practical implementation of force management concepts. Static repetitions of standard defensive tactics techniques can only go so far in preparing officers to deal with resistance on the street.

What is needed is a two-pronged approach to training in the management of control techniques. Phase One of this approach incorporates training in the department's

policy regarding the use of control mechanisms, supported by information regarding applicable legal standards.

Phase Two should entail practical exercises and training in as realistic an environment as possible. While there are various alternatives for the delivery of job related training involving firearms, there is really only one viable option for accomplishing this training in defensive tactics and impact weapon (baton, etc.) scenarios. That alternative is *simulation training*.

Simulation training is training that utilizes “moderate force” to closely approximate actual “fighting” conditions, by allowing for the use of near true intensity baton strikes, punches and kicks. This must be done, so as to properly program officer expectations regarding effectiveness, while honing officer abilities in actual physical utilization of techniques and implements.

In most common, static training, officers practice “slow motion” or light impact techniques, in a repetitive manner. The stated purpose of this training is to “program” muscle memory so as to enable the officer to respond with the programmed technique when faced with a similar situation on the street. While learning does occur during this training, officers do not experience the physical effort necessary to deliver the techniques under actual conditions.

In *simulation training*, officers actually strike real blows, against a live opponent (not a “tackling dummy” or a kick bag). And usually, as the training progresses, the exercises become more interactive, with the live opponent striking back, or otherwise resisting.

Of course, participants in such training must wear protective pads, and are frequently required to use “moderate” force in their blows and kicks, rather than full force. But the training is very realistic nonetheless, and officers experience a situation that is much more valid in terms of what they will encounter on the street, than is ever possible in a static training environment.

During *simulation training*, instructors typically reinforce proper decision making, as well as proper techniques. In other words, while officer receives training and positive reinforcement in the proper way to deliver a punch, kick, baton strike, or other technique—they also receive training on when to deliver a technique. This blending of “how to” with “when to”, results in better control of the subject, as well as the situation.

The cost of this training, in both time and dollars, sometimes leads departments to forego it in favor of other alternatives. While no one program, system or product can promise complete relief, the fact is that this combination of decision-making oriented training, coupled with actual, realistic simulation of tactics and techniques, is one of the soundest ways to manage officer injuries while reducing the risk of lawsuits.

Once officers complete both phases of this Control Management training, agencies should see a reduction in both officer injuries—followed by a corresponding drop in worker’s compensation claims and costs—and litigation. If such a program is maintained through frequent retraining (at least annually, and more often if possible), substantial savings can be realized.