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Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Tactical Training for Frontline Officers**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

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February 2018**

## **ABSTRACT**

Mandatory tactical training for frontline officers is relevant to law enforcement today because of the rising potential that frontline officers will be faced with incidents that suddenly turn violent. Over the past 40 years, there have been numerous critical events that have brought about positive changes in the way agencies train, respond and purchase equipment in order to be better prepared. Although this trend is helping, as a profession, the training in techniques of basic tactical response for the frontline officers has fallen behind.

The purpose of this research is to bring awareness that all frontline officers should be receiving tactical training and supplied with the equipment to handle incidents that suddenly become violent. Tactical training should be a vital component of every agency's field training program and the tactical training should continue throughout an officer's career. Expecting an untrained officer to use sound tactics and make proper decisions in sudden violent incidents will eventually prove costly to the departments and the communities involved.

In American society today, it has become much too common to turn on the evening news and learn of a tragedy that has occurred in the law enforcement community. As proved through research, this is not a new problem and information was easily found by reviewing articles, internet sites, and through personal interviews. Tactical training for frontline officers is a topic that should be examined closer in an effort to reduce the number of lives lost.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sudden violent incidents are becoming more frequent for agencies across the country. Frontline patrol officers must often take critical steps to neutralize or contain a violent person immediately. There are countless examples, occurring each day, where frontline officers encounter disturbed, mentally ill, or simply defiant individuals who plan to inflict harm to the officer. The purpose for this paper is to shed light on the fact that many of the frontline responders are lacking in the basic tactical training that would save their lives and help protect those they serve.

Police officers are faced with violent incidents that develop quickly during the course of their workday. These incidents occur at unexpected times such as during a minor traffic stop or a typical domestic disturbance call. The responding officer must be able to make quick decisions based on information known prior to arrival as well as information observed while on scene. Law enforcement agencies should re-evaluate the training time devoted to tactical response; purchase appropriate tactical equipment, develop policies and programs to assist officers with their decision making and mindset. This training would better prepare the frontline officers to defend themselves and protect the citizens. It should be mandatory for all frontline officers to attend a basic tactical response program.

Agencies must recognize that both young and veteran officers alike are lacking in the skills needed to respond adequately in violent situations that occur suddenly. With young officers this may be due to inexperience as well as a lack of training. With the more veteran officers this could be caused by simply not being willing to change or the lack of training. As for the agency, the lack of training could be due to financial issues

and shortage of manpower. Whatever the excuse given, the truth is agencies can no longer afford the liability of not training their frontline officers for these events.

## **POSITION**

When discussing the dangers associated with sudden violent incidents, the lack of tactical training for frontline responders is the most recognizable. Northeast Texas Community College, (2015) reported that upon completion of the basic police academy “candidates will receive 643 hours of concentrated classroom instruction, extensive physical training, report writing, and computer basics...all during a 17-week period” (para. 2). According to the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (2017), holders of a basic peace officers certificate are required to complete 40 hours of continuing law enforcement education in a 24 month period to include training in cultural diversity, special investigative topics and crisis intervention training. Although these are all informative topics that all officers need to perform their daily task, none address the tactical skills required to stay alive and protect others if an incident suddenly turns violent. According to Stevens (1999) “At an ever increasing rate, situations involving special threats are confronting law enforcement agencies. Experience has indicated that when inadequate resources and tactics are used, deaths and injuries may result unnecessarily among police, hostages, innocent civilians and suspects” (para. 7). Agencies must recognize that the risks associated to the officer’s safety are too great to continue without having a tactical training plan implemented.

American citizens are reminded almost daily by news reports of officers being assaulted while responding to ordinary calls for service that suddenly turn violent. According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, an estimated 1.16 million violent crimes

occurred nationwide in 2013 (“Crime in the United States,” 2013). Commonly, officers come directly out of the academy without any introduction to tactical training. They are placed with field training officers and do not receive the tactical training necessary to quickly identify perceived threats and immobilize them. Frontline officers are responding to events in progress and all need the fundamental tactics and skills to eliminate the threat. Basic tactical skills should be drilled into every officer, everywhere. Anyone who thinks otherwise has not realized the environment officers are working in and the threats that exists every day.

According to one article, 47 officers were killed in the line of duty in the United States in 2012 (“Law Enforcement Officers Killed,” 2012). Forty-two of those officers were killed while responding to incidents that would be considered as sudden violent incidents, such as disturbance calls, traffic stops and suspicious persons. These numbers indicate the lack of tactical skills and lack of a tactical mindset as contributing factors to the deaths of many officers in the line of duty each year. Hawkins (1999) stated that “Not training every patrol officer tactically is a mistake that could cost lives” (para 1).

March 24, 2015, a San Jose, California police officer was shot while approaching a residence by a person who was believed to be unstable. Although the officer was responding to assist the subject with getting help, the call became a sudden violent incident and the officer was assaulted. Police Chief Larry Esquivel reportedly stated “It's unfortunate that this person had the nerve, the audacity, to shoot at our officers that were responding to a call for service, for assistance” (Bender & Elias, 2015, para. 4). The officer who was assaulted was a 14 year veteran of the department and died from

the injuries he sustained. Scenarios such as this are the types of tactical scenarios agencies should be training officers in, as many officers become complacent and forget about tactical advantages.

Another example occurred on July 18, 1984 in San Diego, California when James Oliver Huberty opened fire on unsuspecting victims at a McDonalds. Huberty was armed with a machine gun, shotgun, and a 9mm handgun, killing 21 and injuring 19 others. According to Hawkins (1999) “the responding officers were outgunned and the suspect was not eliminated until a sheriff deputy arrived on scene with a scoped rifle that he carried while on duty in his trunk” (para. 4). Had it not been for the tactical mindset of the deputy and his ability to carry a weapon other than his sidearm, the suspect may not have been neutralized.

In many cases, a sudden violent incident becomes a tactical critical incident, such as a barricaded person or hostage situation. Although these incidents usually require a specialized tactical unit to respond, the frontline officer needs to have the basic tactical skills to form an inner perimeter and direct other officers until the specialized units arrive. These skills are vital in the early stages of a critical incident and can only be obtained through training.

Many officers only receive basic tactical training throughout their career. Most agencies train annually in defensive tactics, such as ASP baton and Pressure Point Control Tactics (PPCT) training, to prepare officers for physically combative subjects. According to The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (2017), they require all commissioned personnel to fire a qualifying score with the weapon they are authorized to carry, twice yearly. However, the training described above does not routinely cover

“shoot - don’t shoot” scenarios or the proper technique of how to approach a structure in a tactical manner while providing the officer with optimal cover from gunfire. This culture has to change; lives depend on it.

French (2009) stated that “uniformed officers in this country need tactical options, tactical training, and tactical equipment available to them on the streets” (para. 4). The example was given, by French, of the Columbine school massacre, which occurred April 20, 1999. The first officer arrived on scene only five minutes after the incident began. He engaged the suspects at the front entry of the school after observing an injured student lying just inside on the floor. The officer engaged the suspects by emptying his weapon and then called by radio for assistance. The first tactical team did not arrive on scene until a little over 90 minutes had passed. By the time the tactical units made entry into the school, 12 students were dead and another 22 were injured.

Looking at the previous case the argument can be made that if the first responding officer had been tactically equipped, he could have made entry into the school and saved lives. A ballistic vest, a ballistic helmet, and a patrol rifle are tactical items that can easily be placed in the trunk of a patrol vehicle for easy access if needed. With this knowledge, one would have to wonder why agencies are not supplying every officer with this equipment. The answer is simple, finances.

The next step is for the agencies to develop policy, establishing procedures for training and response of sudden violent incidents. These policies should ensure that all frontline officers are trained in basic special weapons and tactical skills. Frontline officers also should be well versed in use of force case law. Wallentine (1999) stated that the Supreme Court set the standard for application of force by law enforcement



officers with their decision in *Graham vs Conner*. The officer must understand these standards and consider the crime committed, whether the suspect is a threat to officers or the public and whether the suspect is actively resisting or fleeing from arrest. Clark stated "(Clark, 2014, p.10). The officer's force should be applied in the same basic way that an "objectively reasonable" officer would in the same circumstances". The term objectively reasonable means that the force used "must be judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene, rather than 20/20 vision of hindsight" (Wallentine, 1999, Reasonable or Excessive Force section, para. 2).

Few would disagree that agencies should be providing their officers with better tactical training to ensure the officers are better prepared for a sudden violent incident. However, it is possible that "basic training has become training for training's sake and the assumed "value-added" component to the training product causes the whole effort to become watered down, stale, vague, too lengthy, too expensive, or just simply not particularly relevant" (Connolly, 2008, para. 3).

To train an officer efficiently in the basics of tactical response, the officer will need to attend a Basic Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) training course. In this type of training, the officer will learn the fundamental entry techniques. Fundamental entry techniques include mechanical breaching of doorways, tactical room entries, and building clearing techniques just to name a few. This will be a significant financial commitment for the agency but one that would save lives.

According to Denton Public Safety Center, a basic SWAT training class is 60 hours in length and costs \$250 per officer. Officer Matt Moody (personal communication, August 13, 2015), a team leader with The Colony Police Department

Special Response Team was interviewed. Moody stated that the average cost of a tactical level III entry vest is in the neighborhood of \$1,500.00 each. Moody also advised that a dependable .223 caliber patrol rifle would cost about the same as the tactical vest. This is a significant investment for the agencies but one that should be made.

Department policies should be developed to include tactical training for all frontline officers. According to the National Tactical Officers Association (2015), Section 5.0 states minimum time periods should be established to develop and maintain assigned critical skills. The policy should include annual mandatory in-service training for all frontline officers. If tactical training is mandatory by policy, the number of fatalities in the law enforcement profession should decrease.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

No one would disagree with the advantages gained by mandating additional sudden violent incident tactical training for all frontline officers, yet when discussing the implementation of such a program the issue of overall cost and finances becomes a huge concern. Lack of manpower is a close second. According to the City of Rosenberg, "In spite of ongoing recruiting efforts and a competitive pay scale, the Rosenberg Police Department has been at full strength for only one day in the past two years, according to city officials" (Pape, 2006, para. 1). This is a dilemma faced by all departments, nationwide. With diminished manpower, officers are not able to take time off away from their assigned shift and train. Proof of this can be found with the City of Chicago; "According to city data, the department's overall staffing stood at about 12,250

as of the first of the year, down almost 900 officers from the end of 2009” (Kass, 2014, para. 9).

The lack of manpower not only affects the department’s ability to train and responds to call load demands; it also has a negative effect on the officers as well. With the lack of shift coverage, officers are forced to train on regular scheduled days off. This takes the officers away from their families, creating stress at home and strains in relationships.

One way to alleviate manpower issues would be to select a minimal amount of officers from shifts and have them train in specialized tactics. This training could be conducted on their regularly scheduled work day to avoid overtime cost to the department. This would also be beneficial to the individual officer by minimizing the extra time spent away from the family. An additional advantage to this would be to significantly decrease the response time for a specialized unit by having tactically trained officers available on each shift.

The other issue with implementing a sudden violent incident tactical training program is the budget concerns. With financial issues all around, departments routinely begin the fiscal year without the funds needed to meet their already high training demands. Departments are forced to find other resources to help defray the costs. One avenue to assist with the training budget is applying for federal grant money. Funds from grants could fill critical gaps in an agency’s budget.

Supplying an entire force with the tactical equipment to defend against every violent incident would be hard to accomplish; however, the federal government has assisted with obtaining ballistic vests, which is a starting point for any department. In

1998, the U.S. Department of Justice created the Bulletproof Vest Partnership (BVP) to provide officers with financial assistance in procuring this critical resource. Thanks to the BVP, as of 2017, over 13,000 jurisdictions have participated in the program, resulting in over one million vests purchased with the assistance of federal funding ("Bulletproof vest partnership," n.d.). Although every officer knows that a ballistic vest can save their life, many refuse to wear them due to the discomfort and heat during the summer months. To heighten the awareness of the advantages of wearing body armor, the IACP (International Association of Police Chiefs) created the "Vests Save Lives" campaign to increase vest usage among police officers. The IACP requests that law enforcement agencies support and participate in the Vests Save Lives program by publicizing the significance of wearing ballistic vests and encouraging their officers to protect themselves so that they can protect others (IACP, 2015). Whatever the issue, the public expects law enforcement agencies to provide the protection they deserve. No matter how much is written and discussed, the citizens do not understand the problems related to manpower and budget, they only want the officers to respond when they call.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Sudden violent incidents will continue to be a danger for all frontline officers across the nation. Continuing to place officers in these situations without the proper training should come to an end. Law enforcement agencies must develop programs ensuring that all frontline officers are trained in the tactical skills that will enhance their tactical mindset and confidence when responding to incidents that suddenly become violent. These training programs will save officers lives and help the officers contain and neutralize the violent suspects.

By obtaining the specialized training, the officers will be better prepared to protect innocent lives within the community. Through this training, the officers will train with and become proficient with tactical equipment. As cited previously, the 1984 massacre in San Diego was ended by a deputy that had a tactical mindset. By placing a scoped rifle in his trunk, he was prepared to engage a suspect hell bent on causing death and destruction.

It is time that agencies make basic tactical training a top priority for all frontline officers. Administrators within each police department should conclude that the safety of the officers is a top priority and take the necessary steps to implement this training. Police agencies should discover ways to obtain the tactical equipment needed, such as mechanical breaching tools and patrol rifles, for officers to respond appropriately and with confidence in incidents that suddenly become violent.

Many in law enforcement would argue that there is no need for all frontline officers to receive tactical training and that it is not a frontline officer's job to breach a door or clear a building with only one other officer. Their argument is that the officer should retreat, find cover, and call for a specialized unit to respond. Unfortunately, retreat is not always an option and many officers have been killed while responding to incidents that suddenly become violent. The fact remains, all frontline officers should have tactical training.

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