

Driven by public outcry, policy, and genuine efforts from within the law enforcement community, de-escalation reform promises to reduce harm on both sides of police encounters: officers and citizens. BCSO is requesting funds for a virtual training simulator for its Training Unit, to teach and improve de-escalation techniques, to improve response and to reduce risks.

The BCSO Training Unit is well-known across the state for its excellence in training. The Sheriff's Office training staff not only provides annual in-service training for all law enforcement agencies within Blount County, the staff also provides instruction to law enforcement officers from across the state by way of the Sheriff's Regional Law Enforcement Training Academy. The Training Unit plans and coordinates much of the training deputies undertake. Deputies who are POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) certified as well as corrections deputies in Tennessee are required to complete 40 hours of continuing education annually to maintain certifications. The training staff assures that all deputies receive this required professional development training. POST-certified deputies are trained in many law enforcement subjects, and all law enforcement officers in Blount County train together to assure efficiency and professionalism while working together on joint incidents and operations.

With the continued concern about mass shootings across the country, the training staff places an emphasis on preparing Blount County's law enforcement officers to remain at the ready should the threat become a reality. Deputies also provide community education and provide church and business assessments and training to help citizens prepare for a possible active shooter situation. Since 2020, Tennessee's POST Commission began mandating additional required training for all law enforcement officers in the areas of **de-escalation techniques** and duty to intervene, public assembly interaction, officer wellness, and community involvement.

In 2023, the Sheriff's Regional Law Enforcement Academy held two academies. Class 026 was held from January through April, and Class 027 took place August through November. In total, 92 recruits from across the state graduated in 2023. The Training Unit was granted permission by the Tennessee POST Commission to host a lateral transfer school to allow the training of new hires from other states and bring them up to Tennessee POST standards to be certified by the State of Tennessee. This 120 hour course consists of firearms, driving, defensive tactics, Tennessee's laws, and other law enforcement topics. This has been of great benefit, as it allows the Sheriff's Office to onboard new hires from other states quickly and cost effectively. The BCSO is also certified through Tennessee Corrections Institute (TCI) to train agency Corrections deputies. New Corrections deputies attend a three week TCI Basic Training Course in which they learn defensive tactics, firearms, Taser and chemical spray certifications, transport procedures, and other Corrections-related topics. The Sheriff's Office holds one or two Corrections Academies a year, based on need.

Of the \$334M federal grants offered to law enforcement agencies nationwide, the Department of Justice reserved almost 15% for de-escalation training. This translates to

over \$43.6M in funding to overhaul or at least reform training efforts that resolve disputes without use of force. Clearly, it pays to improve de-escalation.

Driven by public outcry, policy, and genuine efforts from within the law enforcement community, de-escalation reform promises to reduce harm on both sides of police encounters: officers and citizens.

However, as departments claim these opportunities and begin implementing new training, one question remains. Which training methods actually protect officers and the people they serve, and which just check the boxes?

Which De-Escalation Trainings Work, According to the Data?

Recent studies show that some forms of training significantly reduce use-of-force incidents without putting first responders at risk. The Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) program showed promise in a study, leading to a 25% decrease in civilian injuries and a 36% reduction in officer injuries.^[1] This training method emphasizes using time and distance to reduce tensions, slowing high-pressure interactions like how SWAT teams navigate prolonged disputes. ICAT faced limitations, however. Agency leaders noted that the program was expensive and without regular reinforcement, the benefits of the training wore off, putting officers at risk. Future implementations must prioritize regularity to see desirable results.

VR training may be the shot in the arm that de-escalation training needs. Since virtual scenarios require less staff and space, VR and XR allows agencies to practice with the frequency required to be effective in the field. A study of 63 participants showed that virtual and live-action de-escalation training led to similar improvements in conflict resolution across multiple categories.^[2]

X-XR Extended Reality Training Solution

While virtual training has made headway in law enforcement, several drawbacks hold it back from reaching its potential. Motion sickness, implementation costs, and outdated graphics reduce training time and retention.

VirTra has stepped in to bridge this gap, with a new extended reality headset. The device effectively eliminates VR sickness by allowing trainees to see their surroundings.

V-XR's characters are created using volumetric video capture instead of traditional CGI, leading to much more realistic interactions. To learn more about V-XR, click [here](#).

[1] Louisville Metro Police Department, "ICAT Evaluation Initial Findings Report," September 21, 2020, https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/Research%20Center/LMPD_ICAT%20Evaluation%20Initial%20Findings%20Report_FINAL%2009212020.pdf
[2] Jennifer Lavoie, Natalie Álvarez, Victoria Baker, Jacqueline Kohl, "Training police to de-escalate mental health crisis situations: Comparing virtual reality and live-action scenario-based approaches," *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 17 (2023): paad069, <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paad069>.

VirTra Case Study – Frank Tonkovich & Naperville PD

On June 3, 2022, Naperville Police Officer Frank Tonkovich pulled over a black Honda Civic after watching it disobey a stop sign. But the ordinary traffic stop soon took a horrific turn when another vehicle stopped in the middle of the road while Tonkovich spoke with the Civic driver. A man, Edward Samaan, exited his car and charged at the officer with a hatchet in hand. Tonkovich drew and fired his service weapon, killing Samaan. Both Tonkovich and the Civic driver were unharmed.

An investigation found that Tonkovich acted in accordance with the law and that his use of force was justified. Under Illinois state law, "the decision to use force by an officer shall be evaluated from the perspective of a reasonable officer in the same situation" without the benefit of hindsight. The County of Dupage found that it was reasonable for Tonkovich to believe that the Samaan intended to inflict harm to him and/or the motorist he had stopped and that Tonkovich's use of force was not only justified but necessary. Furthermore, the OIS event has served as a training example of acceptable use of force, saving his life and that of the stopped driver.

The body camera doesn't show it very well, but the driver had that kind of crazy look in his eyes. There's something's going on here, right? The next thing I saw when he charged me was that he was holding a hatchet and I knew this was really bad. My next instinct was get the firearm out. And obviously, I decided to use my weapon, and shoot until I thought there wasn't a threat anymore.

In the months before the officer involved shooting, Naperville PD began seeking new ways to improve its officer training. By July, it acquired a VirTra V-180 simulator via

VirTra's STEP lease plan. Tonkovich trained multiple use-of-force scenarios using the virtual reality simulator, including scenarios designed to test student officers' situational awareness and response to unexpected threats. Frank said that the training scenarios prepared him for the incident on June 3, 2022.

It was a very quick situation. I felt like a little bit time slowed down was a little slower, but I fell back on my training when it happened. We had been running scenarios on our new VirTra. Many scenarios had people getting out of cars with something in their hands, so I got to be very keen on looking at people's hands and watching people in different scenarios to make the best and the right decision.

VirTra collaborated with training experts and law enforcement organizations to ship the V-180 simulator with a certified curriculum. Several featured scenarios where the student officer must react quickly to threats, often without warning, in order to foster situational awareness and officer safety, such as a drive-by shooter interrupting an exchange with an unruly citizen.

Right after the shooting happened, I actually told my chief that this was exactly like the training we had in VirTra. You can go to the shooting gallery and practice with paper targets which is great. But when you have to put that skill to use and be aware of your surroundings in a scenario. I mean, there's a lot of things to process at once – I think it helps you and it helped me that day.

Improving Police Training with VirTra

VirTra partners with agencies like Naperville PD to create intense, realistic, and lifesaving training. Allocating training resources poses a major challenge to law enforcement officers, which VirTra aims to solve with training solutions that require less staff, pre-made certified curricula, lessons perfect for interleaved training during roll calls, and less space than competing options.

Welcome To VirTra

Our goal is to help officers return home safely every day. This is why VirTra created intense, immersive training solutions that keep law enforcement officers safe, prepared and armed with excellent skills. We are meticulous in assuring every aspect of each scenario is the highest quality for maximum realism and learning. This attention to detail, found in every true-to-life scenario, curriculum, recoil kit and electronic device train your team to the highest level of preparedness. Now, your department is ready for the unexpected.

Three Screens

The V-180® LE provides agencies with a superior, realistic 180-degree immersive simulation training environment. This judgmental use of force and decision-making training simulator teaches and sustains trainees and seasoned officers alike.

While the large screens and seamless high-resolution video demand attention, the real training value stems from the meticulous quality put into each scenario. Equipped with extensive branching options, each scenario unfolds depending on the instructor or trainee's communication and actions. VirTra's complete scenario library offers a wide variety of situations that run from weapons manipulation drills and marksmanship to use of force, de-escalation and active shooter response—allowing your officers to train effectively and more efficiently.

The V-180 LE is also programmed with certified curriculum to supplement training both inside and out of the virtual reality simulator. Whether your agency requires a cadet training or advanced officer training, the V-180 is an effective, versatile option.

The immersive experience of the V-180 portrays true-to-life situations taken from actual events. The VirTra difference lies with the training points and corresponding lessons built into the software. Each scenario is carefully crafted by our in-house subject matter experts—based on case law and after-action reports—and are filmed on-location using professional actors. With each scenario's extensive branching options, trainees are forced to keep their heads on a swivel as they watch the scenario unfold based on their interactions.

Details

The VirTra V-180 is a state-of-the-art decision-making simulation and firearms training simulator. The powerful, multi-screen technology and 180-degree immersive and intense training environment ensures that time spent in the training simulator translates into real-world survival skills.

- Average of 85 in-depth branching options per scenario
 - Extensive realistic scenario branching options
 - Induces physiological responses
 - Newly released V-VICTA® curriculum
 - Professionally-produced content
 - Self-Diagnostics for a user-friendly experience
 - Structured scenario debriefing

- Wide variety of recoil kits available for commonly deployed firearms

. Scenarios

- Below is a carousel of videos featuring a select few out of hundreds of scenarios. Watch trainees engage with a wide variety of scenarios in our judgmental use of force simulators:

ATCC is a 40-hour high-demand ‘train the trainer’ course hosted at VirTra’s HQ in Chandler, AZ. It teaches best practices and concepts on how to train effectively and maximize training time in VirTra simulators. Subject matter experts will walk you through the expansive usage capabilities of your simulator. This advanced, fast-paced law enforcement certification course is for current VirTra customers with a minimum of 6 months of experience operating a VirTra simulator.

ATCC includes “The Science of Simulation Training” and “Advanced Operations.” Students will learn the VirTra Marksmanship programs, troubleshooting common issues, V-VICTA® best practices, V-Author® scenario authoring, and more.

Upcoming law enforcement training courses for 2024 include:

- Monday, August 26 -- Friday, August 30
- Monday, November 18 -- Friday, November 22

The VirTra Master Class is a two-day onsite training course aimed at enhancing the skills of VirTra simulator instructors and operators. The approach emphasizes maximizing training time, ensuring consistency, and leveraging the strengths of the VirTra training system. Although instructor-led, a substantial portion of the training involves students creating and running practice events, with the instructor available for guidance and evaluation. The law enforcement training course places a strong emphasis on debriefs conducted by both the class and instructor to foster the development of advanced training skills.