

Practice Makes Improvement

In-person Training is as Vital as Ever for Troopers, Even in the Time of COVID-19



Class continues in-person with a COVID mitigation plan. Students' have their temperature taken and answer a questionnaire as they arrive. If a student shows any signs of fever, they are sent home. The students must also wear masks and every surface is disinfected before, during, and after class.

By Gretchen Weiss-Brooks

COVID-19 has hit the training world hard. Most trainers are having to develop new digital strategies for courses that were once done in-person but are now regulated to the safety of the screen. In the world of public safety, however, there are some trainings that simply cannot be done via a screen.

"When it comes down to it, you really cannot replace the value of in-person public safety training," explains Lieutenant Kid Chan who oversees the Advance Training Unit within the State of Alaska's Department of Public Safety. "Virtual training is great because you can reach out to a lot more folks, but unfortunately, you cannot connect with the students as well. The interaction between students, instructors, and volunteer role players is central to our training and cannot be replicated online."

At a recent 3-day certification training in Soldotna, a city of about 4,000 people situated in the heart of Kenai peninsula along the sterling highway, troopers certified in Pit, Pin, and Block vehicle maneuvers. First, they started with an in-classroom session, and then they moved to practical hands-on training before finishing off by practicing scenarios.

By participating in the in-person scenarios, troopers practice making decisions by reading body language and the subtle cues people give. In a controlled environment, troopers practice the tense, uncertain, and rapidly evolving situations that can escalate quickly and that they may encounter as part of their daily job. The trainees must make those split-second decision based on how the role player is acting. These types of reality-based training can never be replaced by virtual training.

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- Lieutenant Kid Chan

“Virtual training can provide some reminders,” commented Lieutenant Chan, “but over a screen does not come close to the in-person, hands-on, and intense scenario trainings.”

Situations do not always have to be based on practice interactions with the public to benefit from in-person training. In a mental health course offered at the crime lab in Anchorage, troopers and civilian employees learned to read the subtle cues that may be given in everyday interactions with coworkers potentially displaying some signs from mental health challenges. Working in public safety can take its toll on employees who often work in or hear about traumatic events. But even in the classroom, safety from COVID-19 was paramount.

In the mornings, trainees from all over Alaska would gather from their various hotels, or their own homes if they live close enough, for the advanced training in mental health first aid. Donning their masks before they entered the building the

trainees would be screened for any signs of fever and were required to answer a COVID-19 questionnaire. If the trainee passed the screen, they would then proceed to the classroom where they would select a freshly sanitized desk, positioned 6 feet apart from the others and decorated with Clorox wipe containers, and prepare for that day’s discussions and workshops. Such is the environment for in-person training in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The nature of mental health classes, similar to the live-action scenario training, is dependent on the in-person interaction of the trainees with each other and with the instructor.

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out and communicate with another employee about this sensitive topic.”

The mental health course is about dealing with fellow employees and coworkers appropriately and knowing how to successfully offer help if someone is showing signs of mental health stress. Practicing tough conversations in-person can help ensure that the trainees can put forth the body language, tone, and overall approach that is vital to being able to make a difference in the workforce.

When you talk to another person face-to-face in-person, it usually provides greater clarity vs virtually. In-person interactions provided a better understanding of complex non-verbal and verbal communication than communicating through a screen. Being able to practice the situations where non-verbal body language and cues could be key to safely resolving tense or stressful events make in-person public safety training invaluable, even in the time of COVID-19.