



TECH b.e.a.t

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Getting A Grip

Facing fleeing suspects and an increase in aggressive driving by normally law-abiding citizens, law enforcement officers need to sharpen their defensive driving skills. In Alaska, a program sponsored by the Alaska Police Standards Council combines technology, mobility, and trained instructors to teach officers to protect their own lives while trying to protect others.

“The goal of this program is not to show officers how poorly they drive; the goal is to show them how to drive proactively,” says Greg Russell, an instructor with the program and a member of the advisory council for the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC)–Northwest, a program of the Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice.

The program’s focal point is a proactive skid control driver training system that attaches to an ordinary car allowing drivers, while remaining in a slow-driving environment, to experience the sensations of driving in slippery conditions or in higher speed slides. It helps teach drivers how to react properly and control the vehicle during a skid.

Using a system mounted on a 1998 Ford Crown Victoria, Russell and other instructors have been providing no-cost training to officers around the State since 2004. NLECTC–Northwest, which is located in Anchorage, cosponsors a train-the-trainer program for driving instructors from individual agencies, and Russell coordinates moving the training car around the State at the request of individual agencies.

“We’ll bring it to you,” Russell says. “We move the car and its support cargo van along the State’s highway system, and the Alaska National Guard has offered to airlift it, if need be, to agencies outside the highway system.”

Individual law enforcement agencies do not pay to use the system, which was originally purchased by the Alaska Municipal League Joint Insurance Association and eventually transferred to the Alaska Police Standards Council. When the car is not in use, it is housed by the Anchorage Police Department. Russell says that both the Anchorage and Fairbanks departments require annual

driver safety training for all of their officers. Anchorage has seen a 59-percent reduction in officer-related traffic accidents in the first 2 years of use.

“Training on this system teaches drivers to recognize and avoid skids, and stresses personal accountability behind the wheel,” he says. The system uses hydraulic outriggers that can be adjusted by the instructor to ensure consistency in instruction for every driver, every session. Agencies lacking a driving track can still benefit from the system, as it allows low-speed training to simulate the vehicle dynamics of high-speed driving. Training also simulates on-the-job situations where, for example, an officer must respond to the radio while driving at high speeds. If an officer panics anytime during the training, the instructor can restore full traction with the touch of a button.

Instruction on the system takes about 2.5 hours, with four drivers alternating turns behind the wheel and observing from the back seat. The first 30 minutes of training is spent in the classroom, followed by about 2 hours in the vehicle.

“I’m convinced that this training does save lives,” Russell says. “That is one thing I stress in every class I put on. People regularly come back and tell me how the training enabled them to prevent or avoid an accident. They quickly and easily learned how to recognize a skid before it developed, and take appropriate action to subsequently control or avoid it.”

DID YOU KNOW . . .

In the past 10 years, 471 law enforcement officers died in traffic accidents while on duty, nearly matching the 589 officer deaths resulting from gunshot wounds. Two years of note, according to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, were 2003 and 1999, when automobile crash deaths exceeded shooting deaths.

Russell recalls that he himself was initially skeptical before he took the training for the first time. "Like most officers with a career of driving behind them, I thought I knew everything there was to know about proactive driving," he says. "I quickly learned that the 'old way of driving' wasn't very effective. I needed to have a new way of thinking to effectively control this vehicle. It is all about 'grip' not 'slip.' This training was quite a reality jolt for me."

In 2006, eight police driving instructors from around the State got that same type of jolt from advanced training, and they in turn helped 225 officers take the course. Russell projects those numbers to continue to increase as more departments become familiar with the program. "Our goal is to provide as many drivers as possible with the knowledge and skills to safely overcome adverse driving situations they might encounter on a day-to-day basis."

For information on setting up a similar driving training program, contact Greg Russell, 907-260-9555. For more information about the Alaska Police Standards Council, visit www.dps.state.ak.us/APSC.

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