

Are Budget Cuts Killing Police Officers?

By Perry W. Hollowell

While it can be argued that budget cuts are making life more dangerous for law enforcement due to lack of equipment funds or money to hire officers, the most prominent budget casualty is training. One of the first things that seems to take a hit among budget line items is training costs. It can sometimes be difficult to actually measure the value of training, particularly to the untrained eye that often holds the purse strings.

So how does this impact officer safety? The most important part of any officer's response in an emergency situation is how that officer reacts to stress. Without fail, officers will revert to their training and experience when faced with high stress situations.

All we need do is examine past events to see just how deadly improper or no training can be. Those that started law enforcement when the standard weapon issue was a revolver can remember officers being killed during a gun battle and then investigators trying to explain why the officer had an empty gun in one hand and empty shell casings in the other.

It did not take long to identify the problem as a training issue. At the range officers would "dump" empty shell casings in their hand and then place them in a pocket. This kept officers from policing brass at the end of a day on the range. When placed under tremendous stress officers reverted to their training. So it is not just an issue of training, but one of proper practice during training.

It is not uncommon to hear agencies say they have cut back on range training due to the cost of ammunition and overtime hours. Gas and wear on vehicles have caused some to reduce emergency vehicle operations training.

The question has to be, do you want a poorly trained officer with the best, most technologically advanced weapon in a high stress encounter or would you rather have a highly trained proficient officer in the same situation with an average weapon? If the answer is the highly trained officer, think about what we spend for equipment verses officer training.

If you were to give officers a choice between two thousand dollars to be spent becoming more proficient with their current weapon or the purchase of a new high tech weapon with laser sights, integrated flashlight, and high capacity magazine, which choice would they make? Would there even be consideration given to how they would get the training to use the new weapon?

Possibly there are some that believe we have the training issue in hand and most agencies have adequately trained officers. Some may even believe having state of the art equipment can overcome officer deficiencies due to the lack of training. One only needs to answer a single question to determine the validity of the need for training:

when was the last time you were aware of an officer that died from having improper equipment as opposed to having improper training?

It is not only an officer safety issue, but an issue of public safety. What can happen if an officer either does not act or takes improper action as the result of poor or no training? Certainly there is an opportunity for injury to others or damage to property at the least.

For anybody that followed the Oakland California shooting of an unarmed suspect by a transit officer it should be apparent that lack of training is far reaching. In this incident an officer after struggling with a suspect announced he was going to "tase" him. The officer drew his firearm and shot the suspect in the back killing him. While there are numerous issues here the officer contended he never intended to shoot the suspect. The shooting incident and subsequent trial of the officer cost millions, including dealing with large scale rioting.

So how does this situation relate to training? The officer's contention that he pulled his firearm by mistake is completely believable. He was a fairly inexperienced officer carrying a taser with which he had little experience or training when compared to his firearm. Firearms training for new recruits generally consists of numerous hours that involve safe gun handling, dry fire exercises, use of force laws, decision making exercises, live fire/qualification and scenario based drills.

Now compare the training he received with a taser; it is not a stretch to believe the officer had ten to twenty times more training with a firearm. Consider the number of times, during training, he drew his firearm under stress as opposed to the taser. Using the philosophy that we "fight as we train" one could easily see how an officer under stress would revert to his firearm.

The price for not training can be enormous, but it cannot be training for the sake of training. It must be well planned, meaningful training. It is important to have the tools to do your job, but they are of little use in the hands of an untrained individual no matter what the profession.

Poor training or improper training can certainly lead to devastating consequences. It is important to continue to train law enforcement personnel to exacting standards even in the face of deep budget cuts. It is not only an issue for our officer's safety but also for those we serve.