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Cover: This issue focuses on the demands and challenges that hostage negotiations place on law enforcement professionals.

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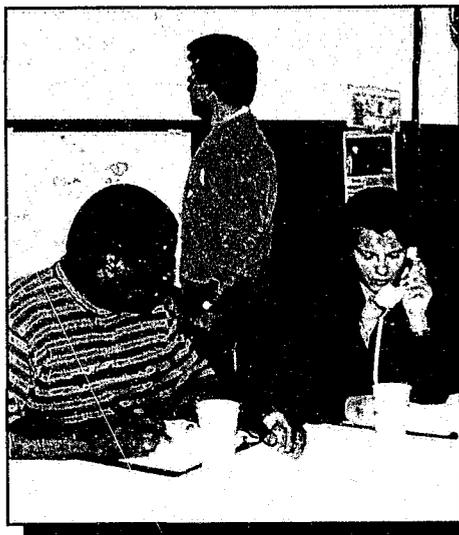
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First Responder Negotiation Training

By
GARY W. NOESNER
and JOHN T. DOLAN



Photos courtesy of
Janet Lockett

A police officer on routine patrol receives word from the dispatcher that a man discharged a weapon in the yard of a nearby residence. Neighbors report that the suspect is mentally unstable, has argued with his girlfriend, and has barricaded himself in her home. The responding officer arrives at the scene with little more information.

As the officer exits the patrol vehicle, a 14-year-old girl runs out of the residence to say that the suspect apparently came to look for her mother, who is not at home. The suspect, who is inside the home,

threatens to kill himself and demands that the officer go away.

The officer knows from previous training and experience that this is a potentially volatile situation. Any effort to move forward or enter the residence could be dangerous and could result in a life-threatening confrontation. The suspect is acting erratically and may be unstable. Considering the situation described, what course of action should the responding officer take?

RESPONSE INITIATIVES

From their first day of training and throughout their careers, po-

lice officers are taught to take the initiative to resolve situations that threaten life or property. But, for example, with the above scenario in mind, is this the correct course of action in every situation police officers encounter? Would it be best to move forward aggressively and attempt to enter the residence or to wait for backup units to arrive? Although no additional shots have been fired, the suspect may try to harm either himself or others, due to his current emotional state, if the officer advances. And, there is always the possibility that this could evolve into a



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homicide/suicide or suicide-by-cop situation.

In this type of incident, most departments dictate that the responding officer take no further action until additional resources, such as a SWAT team or crisis negotiators, arrive. Officers are usually instructed to hold their positions, attempt to evacuate innocent civilians who might be in the line of fire, and take action only to save lives.

While such a policy is often-times prudent, the fact remains that officers are sometimes thrust into highly volatile situations that require an immediate response. The most dangerous phase in a hostage/barricade situation, other than the rescue or assault phase, is during the first 15 to 45 minutes.¹ During this initial phase, subjects are often very excited and will base their actions more on emotions than rational thoughts.

Therefore, the initial response of law enforcement during the early minutes of a hostage or barricade situation can be critical in determining the eventual outcome. An error by a responding officer can raise the subject's anxiety level, which may result in violence or a prolonged siege. However, appropriate training can increase the officer's probability of success in responding to this type of incident.

This article discusses the need for first responder training for police officers and how to implement this type of training. It also discusses how first response training can reduce the need to dispatch trained negotiators to hostage/barricade scenes.

TRAINING THE FIRST RESPONDER

The first responder should contain and stabilize the incident and

avoid any action that may escalate emotions during the critical early phase of the confrontation. In first response training, officers learn to lessen the danger during the initial phase of a hostage or barricade situation.

In most incidents of this type, subjects either verbalize or otherwise demonstrate their concerns regarding possible armed police intervention. To turn the subjects' attention away from violent reactions, the first responding officers can play a positive role by engaging them in conversation. Conversing with subjects redirects their thoughts toward the conversation and away from violent actions. This technique gives the subjects time to vent their emotions and regain their self-control.

Therefore, first response training should concentrate on improving officers' verbal and communication skills. The manner in which police officers verbally conduct themselves has a significant bearing on their ability to deal effectively and successfully with a wide variety of law enforcement tasks. Excellent communication skills benefit officers not only during crisis situations but also in routine duties, such as contacts with citizens, field interrogations, handling domestic disputes, and dealing with mentally disturbed individuals.

Departmental Training

Police departments should consider incorporating first response instruction into their basic recruit training curriculum. These blocks of training can vary in length, based on the needs of the particular department. However, department of-

officials should ensure that trained negotiators conduct the classes.

Departments can also incorporate short blocks of continuous training into roll call periods or mandatory inservice classes. This approach minimizes the cost of implementing the training.

Some police departments also provide first response training to their dispatchers and 911 operators. This training assists them in dealing with distraught individuals while police units are enroute to the scene.

Outside Training

The FBI holds first response training courses throughout the country at no cost to participating departments. The police training coordinators in FBI field offices arrange these courses by request. In addition, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia, offers a first response training course.

A CASE STUDY

In 1988, the Memphis, Tennessee, Police Department implemented first response training. This program focuses on training selected officers to respond to calls involving mentally disturbed individuals.

After instituting the training program, the department found that the number of times it was necessary to call out police negotiators was dramatically reduced. In addition, officer injuries during mental disturbance calls were reduced by almost one-half during a 34-month period.² This dramatic reduction in officer injuries when responding to calls involving the mentally dis-

turbed is an added benefit of the training.

In addition to the decrease in injuries, there was also a decrease in the costs associated with handling this particular type of incident. This was due to the fact that officers were able to diffuse the incidents without the deployment of negotiation teams and tactical units. This ben-

efit could be critical to small departments, which can completely exhaust their monthly overtime budgets during one protracted barricade incident.

CONCLUSION

While it is not always possible to resolve hostage/barricade situations or other critical incidents

Guidelines for First Response Officers

- Ensure officer safety at all times
- Use contact with subjects to calm and distract them and to gain information and time
- Avoid soliciting demands
- Listen carefully for clues regarding the emotional state of the subjects
- Avoid bargaining or making concessions
- Reassure subjects that police will not storm the building
- Do not offer subjects anything
- Avoid giving orders to subjects
- Minimize the seriousness of the subjects' crimes
- Do not refer to persons being held as "hostages"
- Avoid tricks and strive for honesty (If you do not understand what subjects say, ask them to explain.)
- Never say "no" to a demand (This does not mean you must say "yes.")
- Do not make suggestions
- Do not ask outsiders or family members to talk to subjects
- Never exchange yourself or anyone else for a hostage
- If you suspect that subjects are suicidal, ask whether this is their intention
- Do not make yourself vulnerable to injury by talking with suspects while unprotected and exposed to danger.