



MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU

NIPSTA uses VirTra simulator to enhance its learning events

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IMAX-like screens, surround-sound and special effects radiate from the VirTra V-300 driving Use of Force practicum at the Northeastern Illinois Public Safety Training Academy (NIPSTA) and thrusting officers into a multi-sensory law enforcement experience. Participants have described their time in NIPSTA's VirTra as a breath of the future of active-shooter response and/or mixing it up in a policing laboratory.

In this one-hour, two-officers-per-department training course that has been running 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. most Wednesdays the past six months, there is more than training taking place. And each foray not only captures the virtue of VirTra but what's happening for law enforcement at NIPSTA that is so freaking vital.

"We're looking to bring things to NIPSTA that other people aren't teaching," explains NIPSTA Director of Law Enforcement Training Kerry Murakami. "Like decision-making, which is so critical because of the way we are being scrutinized on everything. So we need to train on it. And not just train on it; study it."

Decision-making is the core of the Use of Force training in the VirTra V-300, the state of the art for decision-making simulation and tactical firearms training. It's five-screen, 300-degree immersive training environment is designed to ensure that time in the simulator translates into real-world survival skills.

Such attributes elevate the VirTra from a cutting-edge simulator to a virtual classroom. Such attributes orchestrated by NIPSTA's professorial Use of Force training staff ensure that annual use-of-force training police departments in Illinois are mandated to deploy is not just shooting at targets, but a hands-on experience that is as close to real-world as real gets.

And such attributes have attracted officers from as far north as Zion, as far south as Calumet City, as far west as Elmhurst and



The Use of Force class allows officers to train with tactical rifles, as well as pitols.

from Wisconsin, Indiana and Iowa to face the VirTra. The Cook County Forest Preserve Police and SWAT team officers have also come to partake of the up to 80 (and growing) different active-shooter scenarios NIPSTA can offer to experiment with and continue to develop responses that make use-of-force decisions spot on.

"When I have run some of the instruction, we've put officers through some scenarios that have made them come out of there sweating," notes Patrick Collins, a commander with the Wilmette Police Department who is one of NIPSTA's lead Use of Force class instructors. "These are the most realistic scenarios they will encounter."

Realistic Use of Force training in the current climate of law enforcement also suggests officers should have the opportunity to deploy various weapons options. In the NIPSTA lab, each participant can practice with pistols and long-gun ARs, and, in fact, the two officers from a department can be in a response scenario together working with such components.

"One officer with a handgun and the other with a rifle is a realistic response," confirms Damon Nikolopoulos, an officer with the Skokie Police Department's Special Enforcement Team and a lead Use of Force Instructor for NIPSTA. "We also have the opportunity to have one officer from a department working with a county sheriff's officer. Say it's an active-shooter response at a school, and the county sheriff hears the call

on the radio and is near the scene. That's a very realistic situation for him to be the first one on the scene to back up the officer who answers the call."

Now, just when it seems like the training can't get any more real, VirTra strikes. Collins relates training scenarios in which the simulator can bring a shooter from a blind spot like in an alley to fire a round when an officer is not looking. Through its connection to the simulated weapons, that sends off an electronic zap nearly replicating what it's like to take a round.

"It's more immersive than you think," confides Glenview Officer Neil Gundersen, one of several members of his department who has experienced the way of this use of force. "You feel like you're in it. Very real world."

So real-world, adds Des Plaines Police Department FTO Mike Schild after his stint in the VirTra that, "You really have to pay attention to your surroundings."

When the stress, the sweat and the pain have passed, the learning accentuates. Coming out of the scenarios, which are picked by a training officer running the console and unknown to the participants, a debriefing is conducted to understand what worked, what could have been done better and what to bring back to the department.

"They realize they did not just come here to play a game," Collins emphasizes. "It's a real educational opportunity." ■