

Hillsborough Helps Provide Driver Training to Other Police Departments

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Hillsborough Police Chief Duane Hampton debriefs

officers after an emergency response drill at the Slower Is Faster training last week.

Representatives from 24 police departments participated last week in a two-day training seminar in Statesville modeled after the Hillsborough Police Department's annual driver safety program.

The seminar, sponsored the past three years by the N.C. League of Municipalities Risk Management Services Division, emphasizes key in-car training tactics that police departments can utilize to reduce collisions.

"The connection between managing stress and improved officer performance is often overlooked in training yet is emphasized in this course," said Hillsborough Town Manager Eric Peterson, who has coordinated Hillsborough's driver safety program for the past 15 years and helps with the League's "Slower Is Faster" training. "Overall, the approach is not to rely on car control skills to get oneself out of a dangerous situation but rather to stay out of those situations as often as possible."

The program provides tools — including lesson plans and research — that participants can take back to their home agencies and adapt for training efforts. In addition to classroom sessions and group discussions led by Hillsborough's town manager and police chief as well as the league's director of field services, the program includes practice drills in vehicles to reinforce skills taught in class. This year, participants practiced key tactics in karts at the nearby GoPro Motorplex karting facility prior to getting into police vehicles.

"The karts are very sensitive and provide immediate feedback when the driver makes a mistake," said Peterson, who has more than 20 years of competition motorsports experience, including two national championship wins. "Having a safe environment to make mistakes and learn is a big benefit of the karting drills. The experience of spinning a kart — often because the driver started braking too late or was caught by surprise because they weren't looking and thinking ahead — is a good way to teach officers what can happen if this mistake is made when responding to a call. Adults learn by repetition, so getting a lot of laps to practice these tactics — with debriefings after each of the 12-minute sessions — is helpful."

The five key areas Peterson emphasizes in the classroom portion are:

- Looking ahead and scanning surroundings to avoid surprises.
- Braking early.
- Slowing down to leave a margin for error for the unexpected.

- Using self-talk to better perform under pressure.
- Breathing to remain calm.

The tactics, which can be taught with limited budgets, make it easier for officers to keep their vehicles and cognitive functions under control, the town manager said. He noted that “adrenaline dumps” impair an officer’s ability to drive safely by causing tunnel vision, loss of hearing, slowed reaction time, decreased motor skills, and a slowing of forebrain functions and cognitive processing. The in-car tactics improve driver safety and allow officers to arrive to a call more composed and ready to handle difficult and dangerous situations.

Claims from police vehicle collisions are one of the largest liabilities and costs that the N.C. League of Municipalities’ insurance pool must pay for each year. Vehicle-related accidents also are the leading cause of police line-of-duty deaths and lead to many citizen deaths. For every one officer who died in a police-related collision between 1982 and 2010, 3.78 citizens died, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s Fatality Analysis Reporting System. During that period, 718 officers died vs. 2,715 civilians due to police-related collisions.

The Training

In addition to presentations by Hillsborough’s town manager, the seminar’s Day 1 training included sessions led by Hillsborough Police Chief Duane Hampton, a certified police driving instructor, on identifying the problem and causes of vehicle-related accidents. Through group discussions, participating departments shared what they do for training and policy review. Officers also discussed changes that could bolster departments’ driver safety and collision reduction efforts as well as challenges and barriers to such efforts. Hampton also serves as a board member for A.L.E.R.T. International, an association of law enforcement emergency response trainers that works to encourage research, development and sharing of information, ideas and innovations in the operation of emergency response vehicles.

The league’s Bryan Leaird, a safety and risk management expert and former police officer, provided an analysis of the claims history and types of collisions happening in police departments across North Carolina, as well as their effect on workers compensation and property and liability insurance coverage. He also covered basic defensive driving skills that prevent collisions and ways to incorporate these skills into departmental in-service training.

The karting drills followed the classroom presentations, ending the first day of training. Day 2 training took place on a cone course set up in a large parking lot and focused on decision-making through various scenarios, including sudden appearances of objects in the roadway. Through three sessions, officers practiced skills in their patrol vehicles with an instructor riding along to provide coaching on improving their driving techniques.

“The goal of the course is not to produce great drivers but rather great decision-makers, especially when under stress,” Hillsborough’s town manager said of the cone course. “Calls are dispatched to officers as they navigate the cones, drive under control, and make the right decisions during various scenarios. For example, officers are given situations where they need to slow down and disengage a response that is simply not worth the risk.”

Videos/Photos

Slower Is Faster Training: Check out a short video of officers practicing decision-making and safe driving while under stress during Day 2 of training on April 24.

Hillsborough Driver Safety Training: Check out a video on Hillsborough’s 2014 police driver training and a study that officers participated in.

Slower Is Faster Photos: See photos from the training seminar on the Hillsborough Police Department’s Facebook page.