

## Police driver training seminars aim to help save lives, careers and money

CONTRIBUTED BY ERIC PETERSON, HILLSBOROUGH TOWN MANAGER

**SPECIAL REPORT:** Throughout March, the N.C. League of Municipalities hosted a series of driver training seminars across the state. In the first of two parts, Hillsborough Town Manager Eric Peterson, an accomplished racer and driving safety instructor, highlights some of the key points delivered. Peterson presented NCLM's new police driver safety video, "Slower Is Faster." He also wrote and directed the video.

**L**ET'S BE CAREFUL OUT THERE!" WAS the famous last line uttered at the end of each roll call briefing by the fictional Sgt. Phil Esterhaus from the old television series "Hill Street Blues." However, in real life, situations evolve rapidly when officers respond to calls. Simultaneously driving, talking on the radio, planning what they will do upon arriving on the scene, all while combating the effects of adrenaline that distort perceptual senses, often mask the risks officers are taking behind the wheel. As a result, too often, key safety and survival lessons from training are lost in the "heat of the moment." Police driver safety is a critical issue for a number of reasons including reducing in-the-line-of-duty deaths, and preventing career-ending injuries and loss of credibility for the department.

"On a national scale, more police officers are killed in traffic accidents than in any other way," said Steven Lee, the N.C. League of Municipalities' director of claims. "For example, in the year 2010, 71 of the first 98 deaths were caused by a motor vehicle accident. In the local government insurance program we manage, 34 percent of the frequency and severity of all auto claims comes from police vehicles over the past five years. This statistic does not include the workers compensation dollars that are spent nor the lawsuits against public officials for these accidents."

Veteran police Capt. Travis Yates of the Tulsa, Okla., police department, speaking during March's "Slower Is Faster" police driver training seminars, identified three primary reasons for police injuries and fatalities: speed, intersections and officers not wearing seatbelts. NCLM offered the seminars in five cities: Asheville, Statesville, Raleigh, Wrightsville Beach and Greenville.

To illustrate his points, Yates used a combination of powerful videos, emotional stories, research and practical analogies to show how and why driving collisions happen more than necessary in law enforcement, and to highlight the impact on officers, their families and bystanders. Most importantly, Yates, pinpointing training,

focused on how many of these tragedies could be avoided.

**Annual training:** According to Yates, departments do not need a multi-million dollar driving facility to do effective training. The classroom, he said, can be an incredibly effective training tool. Officers are more likely to save a life (theirs or a civilian's) by using "what's between the ears" even more than their hands and feet when driving a patrol car.

The "Slower Is Faster" video, for example, was designed to be an easy way to bolster departments' current driver training efforts. Combining the video with a review of key policies, officer discussions and what-



Captain Travis Yates

if scenarios makes an annual training program quick and inexpensive to put together. At the very least, departments should conduct an annual review of emergency response and driving policies. This also would be a convenient time to engage officers with scenarios they are likely to confront. The league has an "Officer Roundtable" discussion point guide and sample test available for use with the video. In addition to providing critical training to officers, these steps can document an agency's effort to be proactive, which could be helpful during a lawsuit.

Preparing strategies in advance for high-risk situations is critical as officers already will be juggling a myriad of tasks during a response. In the heat of the moment, officers have to simultaneously battle the physiological effects from adrenaline and a spiked heart rate that affect judgment. Forebrain functions and cognitive reasoning also slow in these moments. These affects coupled with tunnel vision and auditory exclusion narrow officers' ability to see and hear critical information when responding to calls.

Ironically, the same physiological responses that can save an officer's life in a violent encounter can cost the officer his life in a vehicle, Yates pointed out.

### Train smart:

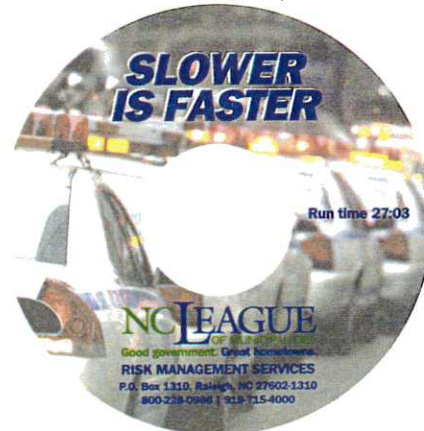
Behind-the-wheel training is great, if done properly. If not, it can do more harm than good. Both Yates and I strongly advocated decision-, awareness- and scenario-based training. Yates pointed out that "stress inoculation training" has greatly improved law enforcement capabilities when the use of firearms is necessitated. Transferring some of those principles to driver training helps officers combat and adapt to the physiological changes that occur during high-stress situations.

Safely operating a vehicle while also handling radio traffic, navigating a busy cone or street course, being aware of the surrounding environment, adjusting to unexpected situations and making sound decisions under pressure, are key ingredients to good behind-the-wheel training.

We also agree that traditional "skill-based" training can be dangerous as relying on skills to avoid accidents has a low batting average of success. Such training can also increase officer accident rates due to overconfidence and the encouragement of over-aggressive driving. Yates referenced a department that focused completely on skills-based driving, essentially driving the cars as hard as they could with minimal focus on scenarios or decision making. As a result, 40 percent of the department's rookie officers had a collision during their first year on the job. The department quickly changed its strategy.

### Train on environmental

**changes:** Yates told officers to ask themselves, "Is the risk worth the reward?" If you are going to pursue or drive quickly, he told them, "Make sure it's for a good reason!" Too many officers have lost their lives driving fast to non-urgent calls. Surprisingly, most collisions occur when officers are not running emergency calls. Yates noted this often happens because officers driving through emergency traffic often



don't adjust their speeds to changing conditions, such as entering congested areas and intersections.

"When the environment changes, behavior must change," Yates noted.

While it might be fine to drive 70 mph on a highway during a call response, it's not safe to continue the same speed when the officer enters a more congested environment with intersections, driveways, hills or other hazards. Yet this is a common cause of accidents. Addressing this high-risk factor by allowing officers to recognize and practice this skill is imperative.

### Support "Below 100 Training:"

Support this national campaign to reduce in-the-line-of-duty deaths to below 100 for the first time since 1944. The campaign focuses on speed, seatbelts, wearing vests, avoiding complacency and focusing on WIN or What's Important Now. North Carolina has hundreds of "Below 100" trainers. If your agency doesn't have one, a neighboring department would be happy to provide this training which can be done in as little as two hours.

**Note:** Next month, Peterson will continue Yates' discussion on issues of speed, seatbelts and intersections as they relate to police department policy and driver training. To learn more about the League's new "Slower Is Faster" DVD, contact Steve Lee, director of claims, at [slee@nclm.org](mailto:slee@nclm.org) or 919-733-3106.

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## Seminars emphasize police department policy on driver safety

**SPECIAL REPORT:** In March, the N.C. League of Municipalities hosted a series of driver training seminars across the state entitled, "Slower is Faster." In the second of two parts, Hillsborough Town Manager Eric Peterson, an accomplished racer and driving safety instructor, highlights some of the key points delivered.

**CONTRIBUTED BY ERIC PETERSON, HILLSBOROUGH TOWN MANAGER**

**P**OLICE DRIVER SAFETY IS A CRITICAL issue for a number of reasons including reducing in the line of duty deaths (LODDs), career-ending injuries and a loss of credibility for the department. In March, veteran Tulsa, Okla., police Capt. Travis Yates emphasized the importance of developing sound department policy to support your driver training initiatives (discussed last month in *Southern City*).

Yates, a nationally renowned speaker on the subject of police driving, led NCLM's "Slower Is Faster" police driver training seminars that were hosted in Asheville, Statesville, Raleigh, Wrightsville Beach and Greenville.

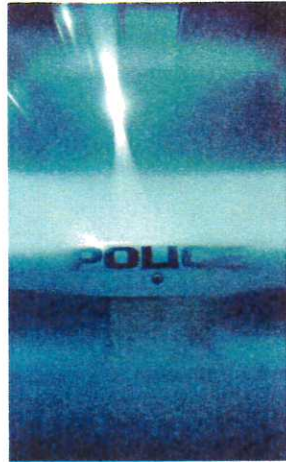
Another reason to support police driver safety through policy, said Steven Lee, the N.C. League of Municipalities' director of claims, is to reduce the number of claims against a department. According to Lee, one incident can result in four types of claims against an agency: 1) workers' compensation for the officer's injuries, medical claims and lost time at work; 2) collision for damage to patrol car; 3) damage to other vehicles and property; and 4) police professional liability — lawsuit/claims against officer, municipality and officials for negligence.

"A tragic accident involving death or serious injury to officers and/or citizens channels all attention and energy to dealing with the situation, disrupting other key functions," Yates noted.

To counter some of these issues, Yates stressed not only driver safety training, but also the need for clear departmental policies supporting the training. Department policies should cover:

**Check emergency response or pursuit policy:** "Vague policies do an injustice to officers," said Yates.

A typical generalized policy means one thing to a 21-year-old rookie officer and something else to a 45-year-old veteran.



Thinking and reasoning ability also are hampered when adrenaline starts pumping and the pulse goes above 145 beats per minute. That, coupled with the many issues an officer deals with in addition to driving the car, make it vital that the pursuit policy gives clear direction to officers.

Citizens regularly pull out in front of officers even though the officer has a green light and is running lights and siren. Hence, your departmental policy should set maximum safe speeds through an intersection, such as 35 mph or whatever the posted speed limit is, even when running lights and sirens. The policy also should require officers to stop before clearing an intersection with a red light or stop sign because citizens just don't see them coming.

**Speed:** The fact that "trees are killing more officers than psychopaths" should infuriate everyone in North Carolina and around the country, Yates stated. For 13 consecutive years, until 2011, traffic-related fatalities were the number one cause of LODDs for officers. Also, career-ending injuries happen at a much higher rate than LODDs. Single-vehicle collisions result in about 50 percent of the traffic-related fatalities in law enforcement. In these situations, officers' cars typically leave the road due to excessive speed. Over the past four years, North Carolina has lost seven officers in traffic collisions — five from hitting roadside obstructions. North Carolina's statistics mirror those of national trends in this area.

High speed takes away all options and makes avoiding many accidents unlikely, regardless of driver skill. Most officer fatalities occur when speeds exceed 75 MPH. Remember "Slower is Faster."

### Target high-risk groups/individuals:

Departments often know who the high-risk drivers are — those who have already had accidents or are regularly seen driving unnecessarily fast. These officers may be tagged with nicknames such as "Crash" or "Hot Dog" due to their reputations. High-risk driving usually involves driving too fast for conditions and when it's not necessary. Making sure officers' responses match the situation, conditions, and are in line with departmental policy is critical. Yet, as Yates stated after going over many tragic stories, "It's not funny anymore." He recommended that officers always ask themselves this basic question as speeds increase: "Is it worth it?"

### Determine seatbelt compliance:

Approximately half of all officers involved in fatal vehicle collisions were not wearing a seatbelt. Since 1980, about 750 of the officers who lost their lives in collisions did not have seatbelts on — 19 percent were ejections. Even after the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department suffered the loss of two officers who were not wearing seatbelts during high-speed collisions, the department's wear rate for seatbelts was just 50 percent. Department officials wisely asked "Why?" The most common answer was fear of ambush.

The department responded by adopting a policy allowing belt removal at low speeds, such as when officers need to exit the vehicle quickly. After enacting this practical policy, which matched what officers were already doing, the department implemented strict enforcement. It now has a high wear rate among officers.

Determining your wear rate of compliance can be done through conversations, anonymous surveys or field observations. Talk to officers to understand their concerns. Address the issues by adopting a practical policy, then enforce it!

### Have courageous conversations:

Saving lives ultimately comes down to officers in the field having what Yates calls "courageous conversations" about speed and seatbelts. During the seminars, stories were shared about the difficulties of dealing

with the loss of an officer or bystander that are compounded by fellow officers having failed to confront another officer about not wearing a seatbelt or simply driving too fast.

"Denial kills twice," Yates cautioned. The first death is failing to prevent a tragedy by not talking to your fellow officer. The second is living with knowing you didn't say anything. It's an enormous burden to carry. Yates credited a fellow officer with confronting him about a driving safety issue many years ago. He didn't like it at the time, he admitted, but he believes the fellow officer may have saved his life. As a result, he has a great deal of respect for that officer.

### Show leadership from elected officials, city managers and police chiefs:

City managers and elected officials need to understand that we also share responsibility in this nationwide problem, it is easy to blame officers and hold them responsible in many of the tragic accidents that occur. However, officers can feel pressure to clear a backlog of calls or to avoid citizen complaints due to delayed response times, especially if staffing has been cut in the budget. Leaders must be aware of this pressure and take action to avoid the risks of unintended consequences. There is a tremendous pressure on elected officials, managers and police chiefs regarding budgets, but he was adamant about the need for them to take a leadership position by posing two questions to their municipalities:

Is our police department adequately addressing its highest-risk operations via proper training, policies and equipment?

Are we, the governing board and management, giving the police department the support it needs to manage these risks?

Governing boards, city managers, and police chiefs have a choice. One, do nothing about this issue and risk living with the consequences. Two, determine if your police department is doing a thorough job in this area. If so, then praise them and continue to support their efforts. Three, address the gaps in your training, policies and actual practices to support the 'Below 100' effort. Or four, refer back to this article and the last sometime in the future as your municipality determines how to respond in the after-

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## Driver safety, from page 4

math of a tragedy," Yates explained.

**Utilize League resources:** The League's new "Slower is Faster" DVD and support materials are available to members as well as a training manual developed a few

years ago, "High Speed: Pursuit Guidelines & Emergency Response Training." NCLM is also planning a "Train the Trainer" driver safety course customized for experienced police driving instructors and trainers. The course would give these instructors additional tools, techniques, and information to add variety to bolster their current training efforts. The League also has a Law Enforcement Technical Advisory Committee to help departments develop training and poli-

cy. Departments interested in League support services can contact Steve Lee, director of claims, at [slee@nclm.org](mailto:slee@nclm.org) or 919-733-3106.

Making these simple changes to your policy and practices represents a giant leap forward in safety for your officers and citizens.

Captain Yates reminded everyone that in police driving, "Success means nothing happens."



## RMS finds root cause of police accidents, provides seminar to help

It isn't a surprise that police officers are most often injured when arresting suspects. However, the second-most dangerous task police officers face is a common one — operating a motor vehicle.

The League's Field Services department did an extensive analysis of all insurance claims from the past five years to find solutions to preventable injuries.

"If you want to reduce losses and prevent injuries, you have to know what's driving those events," said Director of Field Service Bryan Leaird. "The only way you're going to know what's truly driving those events is to look at your history and see what actions are happening, where they're happening and what's causing them."

Leaird said the findings were helpful to accurately show what is going on in North Carolina's insurance pool instead of using data from other states. Through looking at Workers Compensation claims, police reports, injuries and accidents, the Field Services team was able to calculate that the average cost to repair a police vehicle was more than \$3,000, while the cost of an injured officer averaged almost \$17,000.

"A vehicle accident means not only damage to our patrol cars, the injury to other people we hit and damage to their vehicles, but the injuries to our own employees, as well," Leaird said.

Most surprisingly, the research showed that most accidents aren't related to high-speed chases or emergency response, but occur when officers perform low-speed, routine driving activities like hitting fixed objects and pulling out in front of other vehicles.

According to Leaird, that information tells him officers need more training on how to better handle distractions associated with the job, so his team organized a police driver training seminar to bridge the gap between a trainer's expectations for officers and reality.

"One of the perceptions in law enforcement driver training is that pursuit and emergency driver training will meet all the needs. That really isn't the case," Leaird said. "When there's an accident involving pursuit or emergency response, it can be catastrophic, but what we're trying to help our members realize is, in addition to the pursuit and emergency response training, that they need to do focused training that addresses the activities that are truly causing the accidents."



Leinor Sergeant Chris Robinson participates in the League's police driver training seminar in Charlotte.

The seminar spanned two days in April at the Charlotte Vehicle Operations Center. The League invited 18 groups of driving instructors and command staff members to learn techniques they can take back to training sessions at their departments.

Leaird, Hillsborough Chief of Police Duane Hampton and Hillsborough Town Manager Eric Peterson led classes and on-course driving drills in Charlotte. Peterson also helped develop the League's Slower is Faster police driver training video last year. Since early 2012, multiple organizations, including the N.C. Justice Academy and Georgia Municipal Association, have used the video to facilitate driver training seminars.

For Asheboro Police Captain Todd Swaney, the seminar brought generational differences to light that he didn't take into account before. Swaney, who's worked in law enforcement for 26 years, said he will make the training standards more specific to ensure rookie drivers are prepared for the job.

"At age 21 or 22, it's a possibility that they've only been driving for two years or so if they come from a different background than I did," Swaney said. "If we look at the statistics, a lot of the accidents across the state are occurring in the first two years of an officer's experience."

Swaney and Leaird recognize the number of distractions officers have behind the wheel. Operating a vehicle's lights, siren, two-way radio and computer while driving is challenging, especially when transporting a potentially dangerous suspect.

"The average driver only looks about 3 to 6 seconds ahead of their vehicle," Leaird said. "What we're trying to help them realize is you have to look into

the future so you're able to make the decisions you need to make before you come up on the car that's getting ready to pull out into the intersection or make some other adverse action."

Swaney, who's responsible for 84 officers, said he plans to incorporate one of the strategies he learned at the seminar to combat the number of distracted-driving accidents. At Asheboro's annual in-service training this fall, he'll have officers verbalize what they see ahead, causing them to

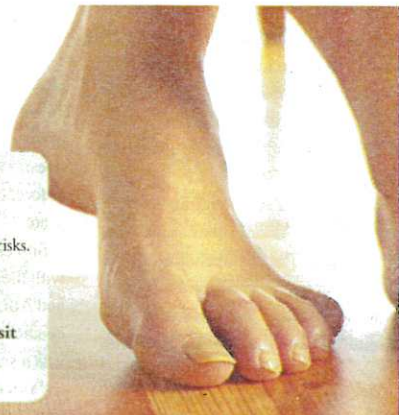
constantly scan the road for potential obstructions or accidents.

According to Leaird, that's exactly what the training was supposed to accomplish.

"It's not just about reducing claims," Leaird said. "It's about keeping our officers safe."

For more information about driver training methods and access to the *Slower is Faster* training video, contact Bryan Leaird at [bleaird@nclm.org](mailto:bleaird@nclm.org) or 919-715-2905.

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