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The Columbus Dispatch

Safety program targets officers' bad habits

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London Police Officer Michael Combs buckles his seat belt before returning to patrol. Combs had been lax about wearing a seat belt, until a recent Below 100 safety-training class was a wake-up call to how quickly things can go bad.

By Holly Zachariah

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The dash-cam video playing on two giant screens seemed ordinary enough: an officer responding to a call of a suspicious person at a closed business. Nothing too high-pressure. He wasn't even running with his lights and sirens on.

You could see, though, that the officer's speed was ticking up pretty quickly along the darkened road.

Then, out of nowhere, a kid on a bike popped up in the cruiser's path. The officer had no time to react, no time to slow down, certainly no time to stop.

As the deadly impact flashed on the screen, it was as if the air had been sucked from the room at the State Highway Patrol Academy. Then, lots of groans and gasps from the roughly 120 law-enforcement officers gathered there. And lots of profanity murmured — some outright shouted — in disbelief.

Then, silence. Except for the sobs of the Dallas police officer shown on the screen, his anguished cries ringing out as he stood next to the 10-year-old boy's lifeless body and called for help.

Everyone in the room was focused now. A couple of people even swiped away tears.

That training session on Monday was supposed to be about saving the lives of law-enforcement officers. It was supposed to teach them how to be safer in their jobs, how to not let their guard down, how to stop making dumb mistakes. It was supposed to teach them how to give themselves the best chance to make it home to their own families each night.

But the bottom line is that their mistakes don't affect only themselves. And that police officer who was speeding 72 mph in a 45-mph zone on what amounted to a non-emergency call was the most startling proof.

Fallen Ohio officers

A national database lists 815 line-of-duty deaths for Ohio law-enforcement officers since the 1800s. How they died:

Gunfire	448*	Fall	10
Automobile accident	84	Struck by streetcar	9
Motorcycle accident	41	Animal related	7
Vehicular assault	38	Aircraft accident	5
Heart attack	35	Drowned	6
Struck by vehicle	31	Electrocuted	4
Assault	20	Fire	4
Vehicle pursuit	19	Explosion	2
Stabbed	18	Weather/natural disaster	2
Struck by train	18	Accident	1
Duty-related illness	12	Bomb	1

*27 deaths were accidental. Source: Officer Down Memorial Page

Officer-involved crashes

Ohio is a leader in Below 100, a national program aimed at improving law-enforcement officer safety and behavior, such as better driving. Still, crashes happen, and sometimes police are at fault. The top 10 causes of crashes in Ohio when officers were at fault:

RANK (2014). CAUSE	2012	2013	2014*
1. Improper backing	97	133	116
2. Following too closely	92	107	87
3. Failure to control	57	77	69
4. Other improper actions	117	60	57
5. Failure to yield	52	60	46
6. Improper lane change	31	49	46
7. Unsafe speed for conditions	32	44	38
8. Unknown	33	38	35
9. Improper turn	21	32	32
10. Swerve to avoid a crash	21	24	16

* Through Nov. 17
Sources: Ohio Department of Public Safety, State Highway Patrol

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"We are police officers. We are supposed to help people, not hurt them," said Patrol Sgt. Jon Davis, who led the training. "When you leave this room, I guarantee that video will stick with you.

"And maybe," Davis told the deputy sheriffs, police officers and troopers gathered from across Ohio, "maybe you'll slow down."

Nationally last year, 105 law-enforcement officers died in the line of duty. Ohio had one such death officially recorded: Akron Police Officer Jonathan "Russ" Long died in August from injuries he suffered in a vehicle pursuit in 1991.

So far this year, 107 officers have lost their lives on duty, according to the Officer Down Memorial Page, a national nonprofit group regarded as an official record-keeper.

An effort called Below 100 was conceived a few years ago at a national law-enforcement conference. In Ohio, though, it really just got into swing in August.

The concept is simple: Retrain law-enforcement officers about ways to stay safe, thereby reducing the national number of line-of-duty deaths to below 100, a statistic last seen in the 1940s.

The Ohio attorney general's office, the State Highway Patrol, the Buckeye State Sheriffs' Association and the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police are working together on it. Hundreds of officers already have gone through the training, most of it in free four-hour sessions hosted around the state by the patrol or the attorney general's office.

The ideas are basic: Always wear a seat belt (nationally, half of the law-enforcement officers killed in crashes were not); always wear a bulletproof vest; slow down; focus on the moment; and remember that complacency kills.

These are all things law-enforcement officers should know, said Col. Paul Pride, superintendent of the patrol. But it's easy to slip into bad habits.

"As commanders, we send out memos and hand out policies ... but that's not enough," he said. " There is this culture we have to contend with. The job seems so mundane day to day, and then that one call comes in and it's 'game on.' Sometimes bad decisions are made."

He said this training works because it isn't just some stuffed-shirt leader speaking from a stage.

"It's cops talking to cops," Pride said. "It's people who have been there and done that, talking about life-and-death choices. It's about asking these men and woman to stop and think, 'What matters to you?'"

The Officer Down organization lists 815 Ohio peace officers killed in the line of duty since 1823. More than half (448) were killed by gunfire, though 27 of those were listed as accidental.

Even though this new training, through a partnership with Nationwide, includes a grant program to help departments buy bulletproof vests, much of the classes focus on safe driving, paying attention to what's most important in any given moment and not growing so arrogant, bored or unconcerned that complacency settles in.

Of the 815 line-of-duty deaths recorded in Ohio, nearly 250 involved a crash of some sort, whether it was a cruiser crash or a motorcycle wreck, a pursuit gone wrong or an officer being struck by a car or a train.

"When the lights and sirens go on, the adrenaline goes up," said Guernsey County Sheriff Mike McCauley, president of the Buckeye State Sheriffs' Association. "But we preach and preach that you'r e not going to do anyone any good if you never get there."

In fact, he said, if a police vehicle crashes, it pulls resources away from the first emergency and whoever needed help initially: "And maybe now you've stuck your own family with a loss and a tragedy, too."

It's virtually impossible to definitively gauge the cost of bad decisions. But some statistics are clear:

From 2011 through mid-November, Ohio police vehicles were at fault in 2,417 crashes, according to Ohio Department of Public Safety and State Highway Patrol data.

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Of those crashes, 423 involved improper backing and 367 were because the officer was following another vehicle too closely.

Fifty-nine crashes were attributed to a police vehicle running a stop sign or a red light, and a little over 200 were because officers didn't yield when they should have. Almost 270 law-enforcement officers were blamed for failing to control the vehicle. And in all crashes involving police vehicles, the officers reported they were not wearing seat belts about 7 percent of the time, but officials know that number is really much higher.

London's Police Chief David Wiseman, one of the Below 100 trainers, said it's frustrating because most of it can be avoided.

"We train and qualify with our weapons once or twice a year, yet most of us never have to use one," Wiseman said. "Yet as a police officer, we get very little defensive-driving training, and our vehicles are what we use every shift."

At a Below 100 training session a few weeks ago, the instructor asked for a show of hands: How many of you don't wear your seat belts in your cruiser?

The four London police officers in the front row raised their hands. Patrolman Michael Combs was among them.

An officer for nearly seven years, he says he straps in every time in his personal car. But at work, the seat belt too often gets hung up on his gear: his radio and mic, his gun, his flashlight, his stun gun.

So he simply never bothered, and he never really worried about it.

"You think about getting shot or chasing somebody and having it go bad," said Combs, a 29-year-old husband and father of two. "But a bad accident? I never thought about that."

Then last month he took a free defensive-driving course offered by the patrol. And his boss made him and his colleagues take the Below 100 class. It was there that he watched that video of the Dallas police officer hitting that little boy who was heading to a neighborhood store for a snack.

"It all makes you think about how quickly something can happen and how quick things change," said Combs who, two days after the class, was wearing his seat belt. "I know I'm going to slow down, and I know I'm going keep focused in the moment. I have a family who wants to see me walk through the door every night. And everyone out there on the roads with me has family waiting for them at home, too."

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