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COVID-19 Field Feature

Keeping Montana Officers Trained During a Pandemic

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CRI-TAC Field Features are a compilation of innovative practices implemented by the field to enhance operations while maintaining public safety and the safety and wellness of an agency during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keeping Montana Officers Trained During a Pandemic

Article by Bryan Lockerby

The vast geography of Montana, often called "The Last Best Place," merges plains, forests, and mountains with the crown jewels of the national park system and boundless recreational opportunities. Life here moves at a slower pace compared to many parts of the nation, but when the pandemic swept across the country, we discovered we were not immune.

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With a population of just over one million inhabitants, served by approximately 2,500 state, local, and tribal law enforcement officers, Montana relies on one institution to train the vast majority of its peace officers: the Montana Law Enforcement Academy (MLEA). As news spread that police academies throughout the United States were shuttering and cancelling programs because of COVID-19, MLEA's top-notch team improvised, adapted, and kept the academy fully operational.

As Montana's governor began scaling back public services across the state in March 2020, a basic law enforcement class of 59 students was just a couple of weeks from graduation, and a new group of students was preparing to start shortly thereafter. Small, rural agencies were already short-handed and desperate to put officers on the street, and the larger agencies were still reeling from



retirements and vacancies. Those factors combined with COVID-19 impacts made it the worst possible time for a disruption in MLEA training. Montana faced the prospect of significant long-term public safety consequences.

MLEA administrator Glen Stinar challenged his team of instructors and support staff to develop protocols and unique operational adjustments that stretched their creativity and turned the campus into a self-contained quarantine bubble. MLEA obtained 55-gallon drums of hand sanitizer, split classrooms were between floors with live-video feeds for the students, placed social distancing markers on the building's floors, and even specifically assigned bathrooms to avoid unnecessary congregating. Facility disinfection occurred multiple times daily, and students were regularly screened for COVID-19 symptoms. MLEA extended weekday class hours and instituted weekend hours; gave students pre-packaged meals; and adjusted driving, firearms, and defensive tactics with safety protocols in mind. One of the unexpected benefits was the temporary banishment of personal cell phones during breaks.

An important part of basic courses is instilling in students the sense of situational awareness they will need to have on the job. From a policing perspective, focusing on cell phones rather than their external environment is a dangerous habit, but it is one that many students brought with them to law enforcement from their civilian lives. MLEA does not allow students to use cell phones during breaks for two reasons. The first is to train the practices of general situational awareness: to be able to see and react to people, threats, etc. in a timely manner. The second, a COVID-related reason, is that when students are staring at their phones, they inadvertently drift toward each other and cannot maintain the 6-foot distance rule. As a result of the cell phone ban, students became much more engaged with each other on a personal level, which increased the energy level of the class.

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Although the training team members were exhausted from the accelerated schedule, they successfully graduated a class of students who were welcomed back to their home agencies and quickly put to work. The MLEA team's creative and thoughtful approach to facing a global crisis head-on is reflective of the western spirit of perseverance and commitment to mission. A few weeks later, a new batch of recruits arrived on campus with the restrictions already in effect, and training continued in this new environment.

In a normal year, MLEA conducts roughly 15 basic courses that include law enforcement, corrections/detention, public safety communicator, and probation and parole. The average number of students trained per year is 500–600. Another 20–25 professional programs (in service training) for 400–500 students are also conducted annually.

MLEA's extensive COVID protocols remain in place. We have modified training schedules to reduce student proximity to a minimum during training and we monitor students' health daily and check temperatures three times a week. We have capped the number of students on campus at 100 per day and conduct training in two separate buildings. We have four dorm buildings. Students in a course all live in one dorm building so students from different courses are not housed together.

In 2020, MLEA suspended most professional programs. Two basic courses had begun before the pandemic and were concluded in March; from April to December, 10 different basic courses totaling 2,000 hours, or 50 weeks, were conducted for 301 students. As a result of the timely and effective COVID response, seven of those course had no COVID-positive students.

About CRI-TAC:

If you are a law enforcement executive looking for support, the CRI-TAC is here to help. Funded by the U.S. DOJ COPS Office, the CRI-TAC offers no-cost, customized solutions to state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. The solutions provided are tailored to the agency and informed by cutting-edge innovation and evidence-based and promising practices.

Law enforcement agencies must be prepared to respond to a broad range of issues. Because of this, the CRI-TAC can address more than 35 critical law enforcement areas. The CRI-TAC offers several types of technical assistance services, delivered by subject matter experts from the field:

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- Web-based Training—recorded webinars and live online training
- In-person Training—existing and customized on-site training
- Virtual Mentoring—connections to subject matter experts to share information and promising practices via phone or video conference call
- On-site Consultation—visits to the requesting agency to collaborate with agency leaders and provide guidance on best practices and tailored solutions
- Agency Peer Exchange—assistance in facilitating meetings among agency members and other public and private sector stakeholders
- Policy Assistance – assistance in reviewing current or developing new policies

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Bryan Lockerby is the administrator of the Montana Department of Justice's Division of Criminal Investigation, which runs MLEA.

Does your agency have innovative and unique practices put in place due to COVID-19 that you would like to see highlighted?

Email us at CRITAC@theiacp.org.

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This publication was supported by cooperative agreement number 2017-CRWX-K001 awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. The opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) or contributor(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific individuals, agencies, companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement by the author(s) or the U.S. Department of Justice.