

# How to Use Simulation Technology to Educate Your Community About the Realities of Policing

***Not only do immersive simulators deliver cutting edge training to officers, they can also help educate communities about the realities of use of force.***

In the “Blue Bloods” episode, The Truth about Lying, Inspector General Kelly Peterson is sent through a shoot house simulation to teach her how hard it is for law enforcement officers to make split-second decisions around [use of force](#). When she comes out, the dialogue goes something like this:

What color shirt was the first assailant wearing? Uh blue. Red. And what kind of weapon was the third perp carrying? A Glock, same as me. Actually, it was a knife. No. I saw it. It was a Glock. How many times did you fire? Seven. No Eight. You emptied your weapon.

The Inspector General’s final comment is, “Uh, it’s funny how your mind can play tricks on you when your life is on the line.”



Ed Smith, Range Master and Training Officer for the O’Fallon Police Department in Missouri, addresses the media about active shooter response simulations for schools made with the department’s VirTra immersive training simulator. (Photo/Ed Smith)

While this was a TV show, we all know that an officer’s level of performance will always fall back to the level of their training, making [use of force training](#) mandatory to ensure the safety of both your officers and the community they

serve. We also know that many local government officials don’t understand why every use of force situation cannot end with the officers and the suspect walking away hand in hand.

According to [this article](#), the majority of calls officers handle are solved with little to no use of force, yet most police use of force training focuses primarily on the deadliest encounters officers can expect to face.

What if you could not only train your officers to de-escalate situations to prevent use of force, but could also show your community you are committed to minimizing use of force within your jurisdiction? Money spent on de-escalation training is money well spent because it can not only help prevent line of duty deaths and lawsuits, it can also help improve general officer safety and community satisfaction with policing.

## WHERE DO I START?

Just as officers need to build muscle memory to qualify using their firearm, they need to build muscle memory to consistently work to communicate with citizens and de-escalate situations. Like any training, de-escalation training must start at a basic level and ramp up, with successful repetition key to an officer’s success.

To show the community, local government officials and the media that you are training for minimal use of force, why not run them through the same use of force scenarios as your officers? This also will give them an understanding of the split-second decisions officers need to make when they arrive on scene.

The San Francisco Police Department thought this was such a good idea that they hosted a [media day](#) to introduce its updated use of force training program using the [VirTra V-300 immersive training simulator](#). Department officials stressed that the simulator will be used to show the most effective tool is often not a weapon. This emphasis on de-escalation comes as the department continues to adopt recommendations by the Department of Justice following several controversial police shootings.

San Francisco Police Department was sold on the VirTra system because of the hundreds of single and multi-incident scenarios available that allow officers to train for citizen interaction, de-escalation, domestic violence, suicide calls and much more. San Francisco Police Department is not alone, as dozens of other police leaders realize that cutting-edge simulation training serves both officers and communities.

## WHY CAN'T YOU JUST SHOOT THE GUN OUT OF HIS HAND?

This is a common question that Ed Smith, Range Master and Training Officer for the O'Fallon Police Department in Missouri is asked by his community. Smith says it is important the public sees law enforcement as their friend and understands that officers never want to hurt citizens.

At the same time, he emphasizes that a police officer's job is to "stop the threat." This can mean anything from de-escalating an incident so that everyone walks away, arresting a suspect with or without a fight, or if there is no other way to protect the community, possibly a shot to the suspect's center of mass.

"We don't do tactical disarming, nor do we shoot to kill or to maim. We shoot to stop the threat," said Smith. "If we shoot them and their deadly actions cease, the threat is gone and we're done."

Smith is a firm believer in continually "sharpening the knife" by ensuring that officers go back on the street every day just a little bit sharper than they were the day before. To do that, he has built an officer training program around his city's VirTra simulator. He has shared the same scenarios with the public so that they can get an idea of those split-second decisions needed to stop a threat. Participants and viewers soon learn that taking control of a situation is not nearly as easy as it is in the movies, and that de-escalation, while preferable, may not always work.

## TRAINING BEGINS AT HOME

When the new O'Fallon Justice Center was being designed, space was allocated for [police training facilities](#), including a 7-lane indoor range and a dedicated room for the VirTra V-300 simulator. By locating the range and simulator within the same walls as the justice center, Smith says it is much easier and cost-effective to keep staff up to date on the latest POST-certified training requirements while

eliminating the need to transport gear back and forth to the previous outdoor range. It also allows the O'Fallon Police Department to easily host open houses at the Justice Center highlighting the simulator. This was very well received during the first two events so far, Smith plans to incorporate the simulator at future open houses.

A couple thousand citizens and the media attended the first open houses and Smith says that city staff received dozens of letters and phone calls thanking them for the opportunity to see the new facilities.

While it might be fun to use the V-300 to shoot targets, Smith says he doesn't want to show off the cool new technology but wants to run scenarios that will give his visitors an appreciation of what can happen in the community, like kids playing "war games" or drinking in public. Several groups have taken advantage of his invitation, with some asking to run specific scenarios.

Because Smith knows there are dozens of cases where someone holding a replica firearm is mistakenly shot or killed by law enforcement, he not only runs training around that specific scenario, he invites parents and other citizens to both participate in and observe them.

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Smith randomizes scenarios that officers or visitors go through and starts many scenarios early, from the time that they receive a call. If the dispatcher says that the suspects are known to be playing with replica firearms, or are acting in a non-threatening manner, does that

change how the officer approaches the scene? Did the officer even hear that in the call?

In one replica firearm scenario, the two citizens inside the simulator felt terrible that they "killed" the kids, but everyone watching got a much better appreciation for what decisions need to be made. Now they are much more likely to tell family and friends who play war games what to do with their replicas when they come across law enforcement.

## FIELD TRIPS

The city also purchased [VirTra's V-Author software](#) to provide location-specific training around the community. This provides training opportunities in these locations without pulling in staff to train on site during nights and weekends.

Schools came first. Smith armed himself with a cellphone to take panoramic photos inside the schools. He then uploaded the photos to V-Author and programmed the scenarios. When he was finished programming the school scenarios, O'Fallon Police Department held a media day where they ran officers through the scenarios. The officers were seeing the scenarios for the first time. At the completion of the scenarios, some school administrators were visibly emotional about what they just saw. Several sent written thank-you notes to Smith because they saw how the officers would respond to protect their schools.

*As further proof that use of force simulators can save lives, Smith told me about an O'Fallon police officer who approached him after going on a domestic call. "Ed," he said, "I'm almost certain that call would have gone in a different direction had I not done the VirTra training. I think that situation could have resulted in someone getting hurt."*

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Worth the price of admission? You bet, and this is why every police chief should be looking at the use of simulators for de-escalation and community interaction training.

To ensure that officers are always sharp, Smith randomly invites them to come in off the street for training. After securing their live firearms, he dispatches them to a call that either they haven't seen before or one where he feels they could use some additional polishing.

O'Fallon Police Department wants officers to hone their de-escalation skills by learning what verbal and body language

work when talking to people. Often Smith will use the V-300 like a classroom by sitting in a chair in the middle and bringing up statutes and case law on the screens to walk through them after a scenario.

Smith also wants to ensure that officers leave training on a good note. If an officer didn't do as well as they could have in a scenario, he will run them through a similar one that they can get right before they leave. Bad stuff can happen 5 minutes after an officer

leaves and Smith wants them to know for certain that they can survive it to be trained another day.

## SUMMARY

While the O'Fallon Police Department has seen ammunition, paper target and associated administrative costs savings with the VirTra training simulator, the big win is the opportunity for [community engagement](#).

The open houses, access to the simulator and the national media attention have created a sense of pride among the community, and O'Fallon citizens can rightfully boast that their police force has the most cutting-edge technology and the best trained officers around.

Like the Blue Bloods' Inspector General, citizens and the media have experienced first-hand what is going through an officer's mind when they are put into a situation, not only giving them a better appreciation for law enforcement, but also reinforcing behavior that will keep officers and citizens safer every day.

*This article, written by Ron LaPedis, was originally posted on [PoliceOne.com](#) on December 13, 2018. You can access the original post [here](#).*

### About the Author



[Ron LaPedis](#) has been a business continuity and security professional for over 25 years and frequently writes and speaks on business continuity, cybersecurity, physical security and public safety topics. He is a Patron of the NRA, NRA-certified Range Safety Officer (RSO), NRA and California DOJ Certified Instructor, member of the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA), and serves on the boards of public safety, military and law-enforcement related organizations.

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