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Stanford police participate in 'active shooter' drill

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BY LISA LAPIN

Bullet casings flew in a hail of gunfire, echoing through a cavernous Silicon Valley office building. Victims groaned and cried for help. And a cluster of officers from the Stanford University Department of Public Safety (SUDPS) wearing protective gear raced through memorized formations to quickly apprehend two suspects in the department's first live drill of an "active shooter" situation last week.

The realistic simulation, complete with blank ammunition and screaming, bloodied actors, was the latest in a series of exercises designed to prepare Stanford's police to be first responders in the event of a significant campus crisis scenario.

"Officers at Stanford University will be first to respond to an incident of this nature on the campus, so they need to be trained to do so," Chief Laura Wilson said. "We want to be as ready as possible to respond to a crisis that we hope never takes place."

Part of that plan was occupying a large former shopping mall and office complex in Mountain View, where specialized trainers set up a lengthy scenario involving two gunmen. The participating officers were required to search the entire building, including small classroom-type spaces, long corridors, wide-open multi-story lobbies, ceilings and stairwells, all the while anticipating being fired upon.

The event was made possible thanks to the participation of cadets and explorers from the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office and the Palo Alto Police Department who posed as victims. Two retired law enforcement officers role-played the suspects. Stanford Emergency Medical Services, a student-run volunteer group, provided on-site medical services; and numerous non-sworn personnel from the campus Department of Public Safety organized the training.

"Being able to train in a 'safe' environment that simulates what officers might encounter in real life – being shot at, injured and screaming victims, unfamiliar building layouts and myriad other uncertainties – made the training extremely valuable and worthwhile," Wilson said.

During the drill, clusters of alert, attentive officers, advancing through the dimly lit complex in small groups, practiced their communication protocols and search tactics at every step. Mock shooting victims with cosmetic wounds moaned and shouted as a realistic distraction. The pace ranged from meticulous and systematic to racing and aggressive. Gunfire was exchanged using simulated ammunition with a paintball-like impact that left a lingering smoke and scent of gunpowder. The atmosphere was intense and steamy, with officers, trainers and a few sweaty observers wearing full protective gear and helmets.

"I found it very useful to get a glimpse of how our law enforcement officers think about and react to difficult situations," said Jeff Wachtel, senior assistant to the president and one of the event observers. "I came away with an even higher level of confidence in the department knowing that this is how they train to respond to a crisis. They displayed an impressive level of professional preparation and skill."

At the conclusion of the drill, officers and their trainers debriefed, concluding that the simulation could have been very real, right down to the difficulty hearing in the midst of headgear and blaring alarms. The exercises
were videotaped for further study back in the department training room.

"I think people would be surprised at the breadth of training topics that police officers engage in," Wilson said. "Officers must maintain proficiency to perform physical tasks such as operating emergency vehicles, administering first aid and shooting, as well as more intellectual pursuits such as being familiar with a wide array of topics from the incident command structure to health and safety issues, understanding the law and keeping abreast of legislative updates."

Anyone interested in learning more about services provided by the campus Department of Public Safety is encouraged to enroll in the Community Police Academy, a free nine-week class offered to Stanford community members during the winter quarter.