

Police learn critical lessons in WRHS hallways

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TEAMING UP: State police and officers from across Massachusetts joined Holden police to train for an event all hope they never have to face: a shooter in the halls of a school. State Police STOP team members taught small teams how to track down - and stop - a shooter. Steven King photo

HOLDEN - Holden Police Sgt. David Armstrong walks the halls of Wachusett Regional High School daily. But on a quiet Friday evening during April vacation, Armstrong saw that familiar world change - radically.

Teamed with four other members of law enforcement from various agencies across the state, strangers until that evening, Armstrong was suited up and prepared to meet the worst: an "active shooter" stalking the halls of the mammoth school.

And though the bullets were filled with paint and the "shooter" was a State Police STOP (special tactical operation) team actor, the officers' faces beneath the helmets were stony, and their bodies tense.

Communication was key, as the brief scenarios played out: a shooter, who's already killed someone at the school, is rumored to be in the hallway ahead. Members shout information, a leader yells orders to the team. Shots are fired, a

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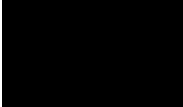
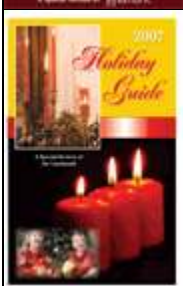
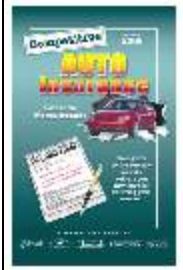
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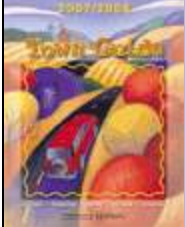
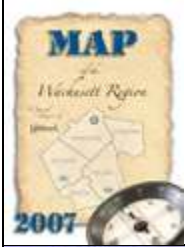
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shooter is cornered, or chased, sometimes shot, cuffed, the incident is over.

Everyone breathed more slowly. The reality of their shared mission of stopping the proverbial armed and dangerous was clear from their faces, as the eye protection helmets came off. Grim faced, they evaluated their own responses, as the adrenaline subsided.

It was as real as any on the team hope they'll ever see, especially to Armstrong.

These halls that are friendly and familiar to Armstrong, filled with kids he's come to know and care about, could become a frightening place. Those students and staff could become victims lying in the hallway. He would have to keep to his mission, to stop further carnage by stopping the shooter.



Guns at the ready down one of Wachusett's long hallways, members learn to work as a team to stop the "shooter" (foreground), who, in this scenario, escapes around a corner amid a hail of paint bullets, and is finally shot and captured. Steven King photo

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Simunitions weapons in hand, team members cover all directions as they follow the sound of gunfire from a state

"I might have to step over the body of some kid I know," he said.

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police STOP team member acting as a shooter in a scene police hope they'll never have to face in reality. Steven King photo

Though it's not

something anyone wants to think about, he's also glad that they do.

Armstrong is one of many officers who took part in training this month, as did other Holden PD officers who learned to become a different type of officer in a crisis situation.

"I've got to run down that hallway as part of the team," Armstrong reflected.

The team moves in a diamond formation, looking ahead and behind and to the side, calling out orders, heading for their target.

"You have to get in there," STOP team commander Pardo Montagno said. "He's a suicidal maniac and he's on a mission."

Planned for months

There's a strong whiff of irony to the STOP team training at Wachusett Regional: only nine days earlier, the high school's auditorium was filled with anxious parents wanting to know what can be done about violence at the school in the wake of an April 14 beating a block away from the school. The session elicited parental concerns, not just about the fight but about report from their children about drugs and fighting inside the school.

While the "active shooter" training would seem to be timely, it's coincidental. Police Chief George Sherrill said the plans for the training have been going on since January, when state police went looking for a large high school to conduct the drill. Wachusett is among the largest, especially since its expansion and renovations.

The school's 800-foot-long hallway off entrance G (the longest of many in the school), was part of the attraction for state police, and has long formed part of Sherrill's nightmares.

"What convinced me to get patrol rifles in patrol cars was that hallway," Sherrill said. Ordinary service revolvers wouldn't have a chance at that distance, he said.

That hallway looks innocuous enough on any given day, but put an "active shooter" in it and it goes into lockdown mode, every nook a hiding place for a shooter who might be as close as the next doorway, or around the turn up ahead.

The team trains, at no charge, any law enforcement groups or members who ask. Holden's police officers were among many others who trained on one of the six nights at the school this spring. Now, if such an incident occurs, they are more prepared to work together quickly, even before any STOP team members arrive.

Past is present

While Wachusett might be popular with the STOP team for its long hallways and maze of corridors, it's the names of other schools that crop up in any description of how police operate now - and how they did "then."

"Then" is before Columbine, before Jonesboro, before Virginia Tech.

"National law enforcement recognized that the way we had been doing things up until then wasn't working," Mass. State Police STOP team training officer John Suyemoto said.

Only specially trained SWAT teams were equipped to deal with a suicidal shooter. Local police were trained for typical local situations, but not that kind of crisis, and not at a school, a place always assumed to be safe.

At Columbine, local police arrived at the scene, set up a perimeter, and waited for the SWAT team to enter the building.

"That's time wasted and wasted time equals too many civilian deaths," Suyemoto said.

In Massachusetts, state police STOP teams developed a new kind of training to meet a singular goal: "Stop the deadly behavior" as quickly as possible, according to Team Commander Sgt. Aaron Washington.

Like Suyemoto, Washington can rattle off the names of the events that have spurred the training sessions. He also knows how many officers they've trained so that if such an event occurs in the state, local law enforcement is a little more ready.

The team moves around Massachusetts, conducting six training sessions a month where requested. They have trained more than 400 officers this year. In the last seven years, they've averaged more than 1,200 trainees a year. In 2007, the STOP team trained 87 different departments across the state.

STOP has three teams with a total of 37 officers in three sections of the state, ready to respond to an emergency and train local departments.

There are signs that STOP's comprehensiveness is becoming a model for police in other states: their training manual is in high demand and they were recently asked to help train Georgia State Police.

Safety while training is paramount. The paint pellets are shot from real weaponry, not from paintball guns. There's a "pain penalty" when one hits bare skin. Trainees wear all possible protection gear.

"Safety," Washington said, "is our number one concern."

A new way of thinking

The paradigm shift that finds typical SWAT team training necessary for all law enforcement has also resulted in a new discussion about violence. The creation of a zero-tolerance policy in all schools that engages the students, their parents, and their teachers in the group effort can sometimes have absurd results, Suyemoto said.

Like the first grader sent home because he brought a water gun to school. That kind of situation is the price to be paid for preparedness, for creating that atmosphere of zero tolerance, Suyemoto said.

At upper school levels, the appearance of a weapon would probably be dealt with quickly and result in a "large scale intervention," he noted. That would keep students, teachers, staff and law enforcement safer, Suyemoto said.

At a local level, the district has had its own incidents to deal with. At Mayo School in Holden, the first day of the 2007 school year had police out in force because of a threat made by the brother of a teacher. The recent fight, caught on cell-phone video and earning national play, also had everyone on alert.

Sherrill is certain that the partnership between police and the community is working. He said having Armstrong at the high school as school resource officer, has helped to keep everyone safer. And he has some advice.

"I think the number one thing is communicating, with your kids, with the administration and with police," Sherrill said. "If you hear any rumor, no matter how ludicrous it sounds, report it."