

Training course evaluates preparedness



By by Brenda Fike

Strategos International gave an all-day program Friday to area law enforcement and school administrators. The event was held in the library of Mexico High School.

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By by Kimberly Long, Ledger Staff Writer
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Mexico, Mo. -

Local sheriff's officials in partnership with Mexico Public Schools, SEMA and Strategos International, recently conducted a scenario training drill to evaluate each agency's preparedness for responding to an active shooter incident.

The one-day exercise – held Feb. 6 at Mexico High School – consisted of four hours of classroom and four hours of hands-on training that simulated an active shooter incident involving model shooters, police response and victims, and required participants to make decisions and react pursuant to their training based on the conditions presented.

The training – which was open to all school districts and law enforcement in the Audrain County area – began at noon in the MHS Library. Those attending agree that the instruction was "very informative," and "much needed" in today's society.

"We've done this before, but it's always good to refresh," said Lt. James Shrader, with the Audrain County Sheriff's Department. "The training itself broadened my horizons as to what the teachers should be doing during an active shooter incident, and offered aspects to what works best to protect the students and others involved."

The classroom portion of the course, he said, gave the history and demographics of active shooters in the U.S.

and abroad, along with other techniques, types of weapons and explosives used in the past. One of the most interesting changes noted, Shrader said, was how much police training has changed due to the increase of active shooter events.

"Police training in the early '80s was to wait for more advanced help (in active shooter events)," Shrader said. "Now the tide has turned, and we respond to the threat immediately."

During the training scenario, he said, law enforcement was notified of an active shooter, and then tasked with searching the building and subsequently "dealing with" the perpetrator. At the same time, teachers were being challenged with securing their classrooms and protecting their students.

"This type of training allows all parties to see what the other is doing, and how they should work together," Shrader explained. To him, the training is "invaluable" and could be "life saving" in an actual situation. School administrators, principals and teachers agree.

"For us, the goal is kind of two-fold," explained Chris Denham, director of student services for Mexico Public Schools. "One is prevention. It shows us the steps needed to prevent occurrences of any type of violence in school, which is the foremost. Secondly, it helps open the lines of communication with local law enforcement and allows us to have protocol in place, ahead of time.

"This type of proactive training also shows the community and parents that we are interested in making sure our students are safe, and have an environment to concentrate on learning."

Denham noted that the district also conducts in-house drills and training with students on an annual basis to ensure they are aware of what to do in a lockdown or emergency-type situation. Additionally, he said, school officials gain effectiveness from various individuals and agencies within the community, who have been involved or have a different perspective on those situations.

Following each scenario, the groups were evaluated by instructors with Strategos International, and given tips on ways to improve their tactics.

"If they saw something that would work better, they suggested it and we corrected it," Shrader said. Overall, he said, the training was successful.

Emergency Management Agency Director Sarah Williams also attended the training. Though her office would likely not be deployed to save the students, she said, "I went because I want to be as effective as I can in supporting the school and law enforcement's preparedness.

"Anymore, it's not a matter of if something happens, it's when."

Strategos International staff consists of full-time instructors and qualified adjunct instructors selected from a variety of agencies and operational units. The staff encapsulates decades of operational experience that includes battlefield combat, officer-involved shootings, and dignitary protection operations.

Recently, the agency received funding from the Department of Justice, Missouri Homeland Security, to provide free Active Shooter training throughout Missouri.

Local agencies enrolled in the training included six officers from the Audrain County Sheriff's Department, four from Mexico Public Safety, two from the Missouri State Highway Patrol; and 24 school personnel.

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