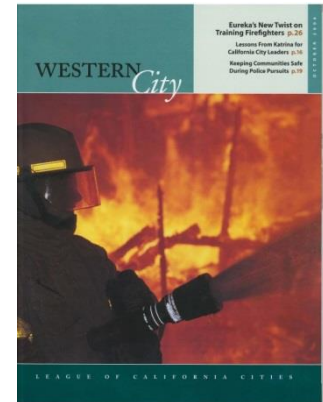


Article published under the title, “Successful Pursuits: Huntington Beach Police Vehicle Training Reduces Liability and Saves Lives,” in the October 2006 edition of *Western Cities magazine*—a statewide magazine of the League of California Cities



### **Pursuing the Pursuer: Huntington Beach Police Vehicle Training Reduces Liability and Saves Lives**

I felt like fresh meat tossed in a salad. In one long afternoon, I fled the scene of a robbery in a getaway car and was brought to a screeching halt by a police cruiser, using the latest technique in subduing bad guys. This time, it was all in good fun.

Earlier in the week, Huntington Police Chief Ken Small invited me to experience our emergency vehicle operations course (EVOC). “As the City Administrator, it would be good for you to see how our officers train. Besides, they are proud of what they do,” explained the Chief.

As the big day approached, I heard stories about observers getting sick in the back of cruisers. Directions came to wear rough clothes, no heels, and “plan to get real dirty and maybe take some motion sickness medicine.”

I took the advice to leave my suit and high heels at the office. Perhaps I should have heeded the advice to take motion sickness pills. It was a raucous roller coaster ride filled with riveting police chases.



This was the seventh-year session in the last ten years of the city’s EVOC training conducted by our police department. A two-mile strip of a closed military base, El Toro, was the location for the training. Designed to train police officers in controlling their vehicles under extreme conditions, the training is credited with reducing our overall accident rate by thirty percent. Officers credit the training with successful pursuits that end quickly without harm to anyone.

The program goal, according to Lieutenant Tom Donnelly, is to teach the officer to react quickly and correctly in an emergency situation. “We drive over one million miles on public streets per year as a department. Under an emergency, you get that first shot of adrenaline and your perceptions change—you see tunnel vision and your skills can decrease. It takes two to three minutes before you’re in control. The training kicks in during the first three minutes when you’re still in the adrenaline rush.”

The city reduced its officer-involved collisions by thirty-eight percent since the program began. For the eight years of 1987 to 1995 prior to the training, the police department had 479 collisions involving officers. For the eight years following program inception, the number dropped to 296. Our best year yet was 2004, totaling only eight automobile accidents—not bad

for a police department responding to 176,000 annual calls for service. Huntington Beach Mayor Dave Sullivan heralds the reduction in liability as “a boon for our community and our police department. Any program that makes our streets safer and saves money is worth the investment.”

The innovative training program includes a technique referred to as PIT: pursuit intervention technique. The officer learns to pace the suspect’s car, tapping the side of the suspect vehicle with the police cruiser, sending the fleeing car into a spin. The ideal conclusion is a dazed suspect and the end of the pursuit. The officer can predict how the getaway vehicle will stop by the way he or she makes contact with the fleeing car. It is a controlled maneuver that ensures the safety of the officer and suspect. Innocent by-standers don’t get hurt because the officer can choose when to use the technique.

“We can do a lot for the public other than a good investigation. We can keep them safe on our streets and in their neighborhoods. That is what this training is all about,” comments Donnelly, one of the program designers. Huntington Beach former Mayor Jill Hardy agrees. “It’s a tremendous asset for our community. The better trained our officers are, the better decisions they make in the field. All around, the program is about keeping our citizens safe,” says Hardy, who acknowledged the training team last year during her term as Mayor.

The EVOC training was modeled after a program established by General Motors (GM). Four sergeants were sent to Mesa, Arizona, in 1993 to be trained as trainers. GM conducted the program to help law enforcement agencies handle the newly released Chevrolet Caprice, which had become the popular pursuit vehicle in the early 1990s. The sergeants returned from Arizona to design the course, borrowing space at an undeveloped park site in a neighboring town. It took two years to design the program and course. Four years later, the training moved to a closed military base once the park was developed.

The program consists of one, twelve-hour training session conducted every two years. It is mandatory for all officers and qualifies as a perishable-skills training under POST (Peace



Officers Standards and Training). Three hours of classroom training covers city liability, department policies concerning pursuits, state and federal laws, and how to assess conditions before engaging in a pursuit. The remainder of the training is behind the wheel in pursuits and traversing obstacles. The cost for a two-year training cycle is \$77,000 or \$420 per officer. This included police garage costs of \$12,180 for parts, labor, and tires; \$6,820 for fuel, food, and supplies; and, \$58,000 for instructors to maintain a two-to-one student-trainer ratio.

Donnelly says the training is more than just handling pursuits. “We are also about changing the culture to give grace to canceling pursuits. It’s a huge responsibility to chase.” He explains that making a decision not to pursue is as important as making one to pursue. “And, the side benefit to the training is that we are better drivers. Our residents and families are safer as a result of this training.”

Can any city design this training? “Absolutely,” says Donnelly, “in four easy steps.” He recommends one year to design the program.

1. **Select a site.** Ten acres is ideal, but a smaller site can work. You will likely need a use permit and liability insurance. Establishing the course will be time consuming and require some expert assistance, which can be obtained through use of Huntington

Beach's materials or from Tom Norkiewicz at General Motors Proving Grounds Traffic Safety Department in Mesa, Arizona, (480) 827-5274, [tom.norkiewicz@gm.com](mailto:tom.norkiewicz@gm.com).

2. **Select and train personnel as trainers.** Training can be arranged through GM or one of the existing programs throughout the state, including Huntington Beach, City of Los Angeles, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, California Highway Patrol (Sacramento), or Alameda County Sheriff's Department (Pleasanton).
3. **Develop the curriculum.** Our program is POST certified. A copy of the curriculum is available upon request.
4. **Arrange the logistics of training, including obtaining the practice vehicles, tires, and supplies; and setting the training schedule.** We supply our own vehicles, setting aside older pursuit cars and equipment that aren't healthy enough for daily use. A supply of old tires with "just enough tread" is needed for the operation. Even balding tires can be used. Orange cones are a staple to properly design the course, topped with a few street signs so officers can radio-in the progress of the pursuit.

The amount of time and energy it takes to learn one skill set for safety was impressive. For me it was a harrowing day. For the officers, it was just another day. It takes moxie, guts, and a commitment to the profession to train and apply the techniques I witnessed at the EVOC. In the end, though, everyone walks away safe and sound—except the bad guy who wonders what hit him.

For more information to establish your own emergency vehicle training program, contact Lt. Tom Donnelly at Huntington Beach Police Department, (714) 536-5918.