

The simulator is jointly owned by the Cottonwood County Sheriff's Office and the Windom and Lakefield Police Departments.

Imagine, for a moment, you are a police officer entering a home following a 911 domestic disturbance call.

As you walk in, you hear a man yelling, "That's not your baby" and a woman replying, "If I can't have her, no one can." Suddenly, she pulls out a gun and aims it - not at you, at the baby.

What do you do?

This just one of many true-to-life scenarios that area residents can face in an upcoming hands-on simulator event at the Westbrook Community Center. Those who sign up will not only see these scenarios play out on a giant life-sized screen, they will face them, gun in hand.

"It's a chance to give citizens the opportunity to see the decisions Law Enforcement has to make.

The simulation event is slated for May 8th, from 6 to 9 p.m. Starting Friday, residents can apply to take part in the simulation training.

There are many ways to sign up. "They can print out applications that are online and scan them back to us. They can also find them on the Cottonwood County Sheriff's Office Facebook or website. Or else they can pick up a paper copy at the Cottonwood County Sheriff's Office or Westbrook City Hall. We will contact them by e-mail or phone to determine a time that works best. We will work around their schedules."

It is not yet clear whether there will be more than one day of simulator training.

It really depends on how many applications we get. If there is a huge community wide outreach for it, we will adjust accordingly.

Plenty to learn

The whole idea of the event is to help people understand the decisions - often split-second decisions - officers / deputies have to make on a day-to-day basis.

"We have a split second to make those decisions," said Cottonwood County Chief Deputy Jim Jorgensen "The rest of the country has months to pick them apart."

The set-up

When people see the simulator set-up, one of the first things they notice is an 8-foot-by-12-foot screen at the front of the classroom in the Community Center. Once the lights drop and the computer-assisted projector kicks in a projected video image appears on the screen.

There are plenty of options, whether it be a traffic stop, investigation, domestic squabble gone bad, you name it.

The simulation system, known internally as the Milo Range System, costs \$15,000. It has been of great benefit for training. The system was purchased with funds from the Cottonwood County Sheriff's Office and Windom and Lakefield Police Departments.

One of the selling point is that we get free scenarios quarterly. It came with roughly 350 scenarios which really doesn't take an officer long to go through all 350 scenarios.

In addition, other companies can "nickel and dime" agencies for things like extra weapons, tasers and other things."

The system also allows the operator to change conditions, such as whether someone pulls a knife, a gun, runs away, or is cooperative. They can also change speeds on how quickly scenarios unfold.

Target feedback

This particular system came with two guns, both of which are linked to the Milo Range System. When a gun is fired, the computer tracks exactly where the "bullet" struck the screen. There is an opportunity within the system for target range shooting.

If, in the baby example, the arriving officer aimed at the woman holding the gun and missed, the screen would show exactly where the "bullets" went after the gunshots.

In some scenarios, the best option is easily one that does not involve shooting.

There may be it's a case where the officer shouldn't shoot, the officer doesn't know that. The whole point of having the decision making software is to make the officer make a decision."

Jorgensen said the system is a great for for all officers and deputies who previously didn't have access to this type of training. Before, Officers had to travel out-of-town locations, such as Minnesota West Technical College in Worthington. Now they can use the system almost any time - daytime, or evenings -to fit their schedules. The system is portable, so Lakefield officers can easily pack it up and take it to their headquarters.

The most important thing is, the new system gives officers a chance to do far more training than ever before.

If there is a wrong decision, we want to do it here during training. We were lucky we were able to partner with two other departments so we could afford the system. This is a really good training tool."