



BUILDING EMPATHY, BREAKING DOWN FEAR

Case Study: Axon VR x MCES
(Montgomery County Emergency Services)



THE MISSION

Traditional person-in-crisis training consists of actors roleplaying as persons experiencing mental health crises. Officers are dropped into staged scenarios where the officer interacts with roleplaying individuals and must determine what's occurring in the scenario and how to best address and resolve the situation.

In theory, this training simulates real-world conditions. But in practice, this traditional training method is subject to human error. Accurately portraying a person in crisis is no easy task, and accurately demonstrating a person in crisis' response to first responder intervention is nearly impossible, as responses vary greatly depending on the individual and environmental factors.

How can agencies more effectively and efficiently train officers to respond to and resolve person-in-crisis calls?

/ THE CHALLENGE

One of the greatest issues that police officers face when dealing with mental health crises is a "fear factor," says Montgomery County SWAT Negotiator Vic Machese. As hard as officers may try, there's a barrier to understanding, as responding officers rarely know exactly what a person in crisis is going through.

Montgomery County Emergency Services (MCES) and Machese are working to break this barrier down through empathy training. "We have all these people...when they come in, the fear factor goes away because we listen to their stories, we learn from them. We understand in an empathetic type of way by putting ourselves, or putting our family members, in their shoes" explains Machese. At the end of the day, "they're just people."

The Axon VR Platform is a technology-based solution to increase empathy-based training amongst agencies.

/ THE SOLUTION

Montgomery County Emergency Services was one of the first public safety agencies to embrace the Axon VR training platform, which Machese says was "phenomenal" from the outset.

Machese is a Crisis Intervention Specialist instructor for MCES, and trains officers on de-escalation and understanding mental health issues. MCES was the first of such crisis intervention programs in the United States, founded in 1976 and laying the groundwork for CIT International. Machese was an early and ardent supporter of the Axon VR training platform, which puts officers in the shoes of people experiencing a mental health crisis to build deeper understanding and enable more effective responses.

Using VR headsets, Axon VR shows officers not just what a crisis call may be like from their own perspective, but also the perspective of the person in crisis. "To see anything from another person's perspective, it helps you realize what someone could go through," Machese says. Machese was particularly impressed with an Axon VR training scenario on autism, which conveys to the trainee a sense of overstimulation that a person living on the spectrum may feel during an interaction with first responders. "You're in it, and it's hard not to feel what the individual is feeling, and I think that's fantastic."

Machese sees Axon VR scenarios as “empathy-based training.” He elaborates that many people who haven’t gone through training scenarios see common neuro-divergent behavior as a behavioral problem. Once those individuals go through Axon VR training, they begin to see these issues in a new light. “It kind of rewires your brain to say ‘it’s not behavioral, [they] didn’t have any control over it.’”

Part of Axon VR training’s effectiveness comes from how realistic the scenarios are. “If you want to look to see the boots the guy is wearing, you can look down and see the kind of boots the guy is wearing... It’s as real as real can be without you actually being in the situation.” Not only are these scenarios realistic, but the Axon VR training catalog expands on a quarterly basis.

Machese’s early input, as well as the feedback of other Axon VR adopters, has helped shape the program into today’s form. Customer feedback will continue to guide the Axon VR team during their development process of new scenarios.

/ RESULTS

Axon VR training is forging a generation of officers that is more confident in their ability to respond to crisis situations. MCES has created a feedback system that specifically asks whether officers feel more confident in their ability to handle mental health scenarios after using the Axon VR training catalog---99% said yes. In the next 10 years, Machese believes that every officer nationwide will undergo some form of VR training to prepare for mental health scenarios. Other first responders could also benefit from the training, Machese says, from paramedics to firefighters — and even teachers.

Every call is different. The unpredictable nature of public safety professions means that officers must be prepared to de-escalate countless mental health scenarios in the field. Axon VR works to ensure every officer has the necessary tools at their disposal to do just this.

Machese receives calls from officers and chiefs regularly noting how MCES’ crisis intervention curriculum has assisted them in the field. MCES is working hard to create safer, more empathetic communities, and Axon’s VR training is here to help in that mission.

Interested in learning more about how Axon can improve your professional standards processes? Contact our team today at vr@axon.com.

