



Growing Atlanta-Metro County Improves Training & Community Relations in Mobile Building



Leveraging a mobile trailer unit donated from the school district, Spalding County had a facility to use, but lacked a training system that provided a realistic experience for county law enforcement. A FATS® 180LE was the answer to the simulation puzzle, providing true-to-life scenarios for sworn officers and added value to the citizen academy efforts.

With a population around 66,000, Spalding County sits in west-central Georgia. Residents enjoy "small town charm" surrounded by the natural beauty of lakes, scenic parks, trails and historic landmarks. Yet Spalding is also at the south end of the Atlanta metropolitan area, the largest and one of the fastest growing in the United States, so "big-city amenities" are only about 45 minutes away. The county seat, Griffin, is a college town, too: home to the University of Georgia's Griffin campus, which uniquely combines a small-college atmosphere with a degree from a university with a strong national reputation.

Protecting this prized way of life falls to the Sheriff Office's 170+ sworn law enforcement officers, of whom more than

80 are field (non-correctional) officers. All officers have statewide jurisdiction to pursue suspects from incidents originating within the county.

Recent years have been challenging for Spalding's law enforcement as they have been across America. Agencies, large and small, have found themselves struggling to help their communities grasp the demands on the office. While calls for de-escalation of force have mounted, few know what this change means for the officer who has seconds or less to make life-and-death decisions. Consequently, those entrusted with training officers have faced an increased responsibility to choose the best possible training solutions.

Lieutenant Little and the quest for the best training solution

In 2019, Spalding County Sheriff Darrell Dix assigned Lieutenant Tony Little to develop more realistic training. Little had the right background for the job. Joining the Sheriff's office in 2002, he had graduated with the highest honor from his own academy training. In the following years, he rotated through key roles, from crime scene investigator to gang specialist. In 2014, he first took on training duties, including marksmanship and force-on-force. In 2018, these skills commended him to accept a position with the Georgia Public Safety Training Center as a full-time instructor in the Basic Training Division. There, he assisted in training hundreds of officers from both local and state agencies.

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In 2019, Lt. Little rejoined the Spalding County Sheriff's Office as the departmental training officer, holding a wide range of training certifications, including use of force, active shooter and firearms. He recognized that the county needed improved training, and his recent experiences on the state level gave him clues as to how to get the right system for Spalding officers and citizens.

Says Little, "We have a strong relationship with our community. So, I wanted a solution that would work for our citizens as well as officer trainees."

According to Little, Spalding County use-of-force and in-action marksmanship training had traditionally relied on so-called "sim rounds," simulated non-lethal, non-toxic ammunitions. Trainers would set up live scenarios that relied on shooting the "simunition" with officers role-playing suspects. However, not only did the encounters often lack the realism of unexpected threats, but the simulated bullets could be injurious to the trainees. Little experienced this liability personally. He jokes that even his wife saw the toll that a session would take.

Little believed that virtual simulators were the answer. At the state training center, he had witnessed the InVeris FATS® 300LE wrap-around, five-screen immersive virtual simulator. While he was "wowed" by the realism, he felt that Spalding County needed a more compact system that would fit space limitations. Over the years, the Sheriff's



Office, which had not been remodeled since the 1990s, had literally outgrown its available expanse. Little's proposed solution would have to meet the immersive realism requirement while fitting into a dual trailer, previously used for offices.

Having carefully investigated earlier generation simulators, Little found that single-screen systems did not provide sufficient realism. Further, courseware was often outdated, failing to address present legal realities regarding use of force and de-escalation. He then looked at a similar, scaled-down version to InVeris' FATS 300LE; the three-screen FATS 180°LE delivered true-to-life, 180-degree, high-definition projection and 5.1 surround sound. Little appreciated that the three screens solved a critical requirement: officers must be ready to respond to an unexpected threat, coming in any situation, from any direction, at any time.

"Citizens particularly like the surprise effect when we have them focus on one area of the screen while a threat comes from another angle. It's a quick way to see what their law officers must be prepared for every day."

The InVeris system also included an initial library of courseware with pertinent scenarios, from de-escalation to active shooter to marksmanship. Outperforming older



options of sim rounds and paper targets, the system heightened awareness and proper judgmental responses. The instructor could “branch” the direction of the scenario depending on officer responses. Meanwhile, officers felt comfortable with the BlueFire® untethered weapons that resembled their own duty weapons.

As for the size issue, Little admits that initially the installation appeared difficult. He recalls, “The ceiling was a little too low. Then the InVeris technicians worked some magic and it fit. Whenever I have had any issue since then, I’ve been able to call on that expertise and they’ve been fast to respond.”

Little likes that the FATS 180LE is a “stress inoculant” especially for de-escalation. Two out of three scenarios have a de-escalation scenario, where officers must “talk down” a potentially violent suspect. Sometimes, however, a trainee cannot use words effectively.

“Now, we can use the simulator for remedial training for no costs. Or if the instructor has a problem convincing a trainee that they are jerking the trigger, they can simply show the playback.”

He explains, “Some of our trainees just out of the academy don’t have the gift of gab. So, we simply have them stay in the trainer until they learn how to get better control.”

Little notes that with the FATS 180LE he can teach someone to master this “slow-down” process even in the volatile situation of a car stop: “The scenarios offer a chance to deal with quick hand movements. Suppose you get the suspect to exit the car and then suddenly the person reaches back. In past force-on-force scenarios, the correct response might be to shoot to save the officer’s life. But now we have scenarios where the right thing to do may be to slow down. The suspect might emerge with a wallet rather than a gun in the hand.”

Added Value: Serving the community’s Citizen Academy

The Spalding County Sheriff’s Office offers a highly popular Citizen Academy, typically consisting of ten 2.5-hour modules, covering every aspect of the department’s activities. The Academy has integrated training on the FATS 180LE into the curriculum. Citizens can now better understand the judgmental dilemmas that officers face in responding to threats. This experience has enhanced the already strong relations that the department has with the citizenry it serves and protects.

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The Results: Complete customer satisfaction

Two years after purchase, the Sheriff’s Office and its officers remain pleased with the decision to upgrade to the 180LE. Little enumerates the ways that the system has improved training efficiency and saved funds.

He finds it especially effective with trainees fresh from the academy: “Some of them have never handled a firearm. If they are having trouble with marksmanship, we used to see them waste a lot of ammunition. Now, we can use the simulator for remedial training for no costs. Or if the instructor has a problem convincing a trainee that they are jerking the trigger, they can simply show the playback.”

As for de-escalation, Little answers, “We don’t have statistical evidence yet. But we have already noted that the system appears to have reduced escalation in local incidents.”

The InVeris FATS 180LE clearly helps the Spalding County Sheriff’s Office live its purpose: “Protect with Courage. Serve with Compassion.”

InVeris Training Solutions is the global leader in integrated live-fire and virtual weapons training solutions. With its legacy companies, FATS® and Caswell, InVeris Training Solutions has fielded over 15,500 live-fire ranges and 7,500 virtual systems globally during its 95-year history. The company is headquartered in Suwanee, Georgia and partners with clients in the U.S. and around the world from facilities on five continents.