Firearms Study Hall Program
Contributed by the Los Angeles, CA, Police Department
**Background**

In 2019, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) recognized a significant trend of firearm training failures among female recruit officers. LAPD command staff directed the Department Training Division to assess the existing firearms training curriculum with the goal of developing a strategy to improve passing rates for female recruit officers, as well as candidates in the hiring process. The assessment determined that many female recruits lack prior experience with firearms, which caused intimidation and anxiety during the training and qualification process, which affected their performance.

In response to the assessment, two programs were developed to familiarize recruits and recruit candidates with firearms. One program, the Candidate Advancement Program (CAP) is directed toward candidates that are in the pre-academy hiring process. The other program is designed to improve firearm passing rates of recruit officers in the training academy. The two programs together are known as “Firearms Study Hall.”

**Candidate Advancement Program**

The LAPD currently offers the Candidate Advancement Program (CAP) which is a pre-academy initiative that familiarizes police officer candidates with protocols and prepares them to meet the physical, mental and emotional adjustments of the police academy. The CAP is free of charge, and has proven to build confidence, competency and readiness for recruit candidates as they are being considered for hiring. Based on need, participants in the CAP are exposed to a rotating series of training including:

- Candidate Advancement Program – Wellness
- Candidate Advancement Program – Law
- Candidate Advancement Program – Physical Fitness
- Candidate Advancement Program – Report Writing

Recruit officer candidates who have participated in the CAP program have demonstrated a higher level of capability, which ultimately has led to greater training academy passing rates and overall knowledge retention.

While analyzing the trend of academy firearm qualification failures, it was identified that police officer candidates could also greatly benefit from a Candidate Advancement Program directed toward firearms training, prior to entering the police academy. Therefore, Training Division and Recruitment and Employment Division (RED) collaborated and expanded the CAP to include firearms training.

The CAP - Firearms curriculum provides familiarization and basic orientation with handguns and is a condensed overview of recruit officer academy training with lectures and hands-on firearms demonstrations. The program is offered to all CAP participants who are in the latter stages of the hiring process, but the program has consisted of primarily female participants who have sought
to raise their comfort levels with firearms prior to entering the police academy.

Feedback from participants and instructors of CAP - Firearms has been overwhelmingly positive and supportive. The most compelling comments by female candidates referred to the benefits of early exposure to the firearms range, touring the training facilities, and meeting female instructors who were viewed as mentors and role models. Although there have not been enough courses delivered to analyze long term efficacy, it has been determined that the program minimized anxiety and enhanced the confidence levels amongst those who participated.

**Recruit Academy - Firearms Study Hall**

The assessment of the academy firearms curriculum revealed additional factors contributing to a high failure rate:

- Most recruit officers have had little to no prior experience with firearms;
- The majority of those who did have experience received it from military training, which generally focuses on operating and manipulating rifles, not handguns;
- Some recruits have difficulty mastering the fine motor skills required for handgun manipulations, which require hand strength and familiarity with the weapon system;
- The 7 elements of marksmanship (stance, grip, sight alignment, sight picture, trigger press, breathing, and follow-through) are fundamentals that require practice to master; some recruits learn these elements faster than others.

In response to the assessment of the firearms course, the LAPD developed Firearms Study Hall for Academy recruits. Each recruit officer is given the option to attend four study hall sessions on a Saturday within the first four months of academy training. During study hall sessions, recruits practice manipulations of both the handgun and the shotgun, the 7-elements of marksmanship, daytime practice live fire, and other practice designed to raise confidence and shooting ability. Each Saturday study hall is divided into 2-hour block rotations designed to provide more individualized instruction. The study hall instruction is broken into the following sessions:

- **First Study Hall** – The first study hall is offered at the end of classes during 1st through 4th week of the academy. Recruits practice the presentation of the firearm from the holster, pistol loading and unloading, and how to clear pistol malfunctions.

- **Second Study Hall** – The second firearms study hall is offered between the 5th and 8th academy week. Recruits, while being instructed in small groups, practice marksmanship and combat pistol drills designed to train by repetition. This format builds the recruits’ skills and ability in operating a pistol, which in return builds their confidence.

- **Third Study Hall** – The third firearms study hall is completed between the 9th and 12th week of the academy. Recruits practice marksmanship and combat pistol drills to prepare them for the Pistol Manipulation Test and the Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Daytime Pistol Combat Test.
• **Fourth Study Hall** – The fourth firearms study hall is completed during the 13th through 16th weeks of the academy. Recruits practice marksmanship and combat drills with the shotgun to prepare them for the Shotgun Manipulation Test and the California Peace Officers Standards and Training (Cal-POST) Daytime Shotgun Combat Test. The recruits work in small groups and rotate to different stations and instructors.

*There are no Firearms Study Halls during the 17th through 20th weeks of the academy, as the classes are then broken into four smaller groups for nighttime firearm rotation training. These smaller groups incorporate individualized attention for the skill development of each recruit. At this point in the training cycle, the recruits should have already acquired the foundational skills they will need to pass the firearms course.

**Mental Preparation and Support**

To address anxiety that some recruits experience during the qualification process, LAPD Training Division solicited guidance from their in-house Behavioral Science Services (BSS), the unit comprised of police psychologists. After evaluating existing processes, BSS determined that confidence building is vital to improving recruit performance. As a result, BSS created and delivered a course for concepts in mental preparation related to firearms training in the Academy, similar to peak performance practices employed by athletes.

**Supplemental Pistol Practice**

When the LAPD academy is running multiple classes concurrently, time on the live fire range is limited by lack of space and the amount of training personnel available to teach recruits. To supplement live fire practice, the LAPD conducted research to evaluate the effectiveness of pistol dry fire training systems. It was determined that the “Shot Indicating Resetting Trigger” training pistols and “Mantis X” sight training aids, when used, would supplement live fire range time and improve shooting performance for sight alignment and trigger control.
Metrics Analysis

The LAPD found that during the one-year period the Study Hall program has been instrumental in reducing failures during first and second qualification attempts for firearms.

Note: Failing the same firearms test twice disqualifies a recruit officer from the training academy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Study Hall</th>
<th>Study Hall Available</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>June 2018 to June 2019 (11 Tests Total)</strong></td>
<td><strong>August 2019 to September 2020 (7 Tests Total)</strong></td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>585 Recruits</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>557 Recruits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male 1st Attempt Failures</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>Male 1st attempt failure</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1st Attempt Failures</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>Female 1st attempt failures</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS:</strong></td>
<td>257</td>
<td><strong>TOTALS:</strong></td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 2nd attempt failure</td>
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<td>Male 2nd attempt failure</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 2nd attempt failures</td>
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<td>Female 2nd attempt failures</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACADEMY* DQ TOTAL:</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>ACADEMY* DQ TOTAL:</td>
<td>5</td>
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A one-year comparison revealed a 56% decrease in first attempt firearm qualification failures and a 78% decrease in second attempt failures. A more thorough analysis revealed that female second attempt firearm qualification failures decreased 76%.

In summary, the addition of the Firearms Study Halls allows for motivated recruits to access individualized training to help them succeed. It provides supervised and accessible training to those who may be practicing incorrectly or developing poor habits that interfere with their capabilities.

**Conclusion**

The Firearms Study Hall program has significantly strengthened recruit and candidate retention while reducing firearm qualification failures.

For law enforcement organizations seeking to implement similar programs, it is recommended that careful consideration is given to providing an adequate ratio of instructors to students; select candidates to participate in this program that are far enough along in the hiring process that they are likely to be hired; ensure students have both live fire and dry fire shooting environments available to provide maximum exposure to the firearm in a regulated environment.