

# Law Enforcement & Field Training: The Evolution of a Decades-Old Process for Modern Departments

ENVISAGE  
TECHNOLOGIES

May 14, 2019

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## Abstract

Born from a bureaucratic personnel issue turned tragedy, the San Jose Police Department’s “Field Training Plans” are arguably the most influential addition to industry training protocol in half a century—and undoubtedly the most widespread. Using their Field Training and Evaluation Program as a starting point, this paper will discuss the practice, its influence, and the positive impact technology can have in its continued evolution.

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## Introduction

In the spring of 1970, the San Jose Police Department (SJPD) found that the only thing worse than an “unsolvable” bureaucratic problem was one that resulted in a tragedy. Though supervisors had searched for a reason to terminate a problematic young officer’s employment during his nine-month career, the chance only came after he sped through a red light while responding to a non-emergency call. Tragically, his mistake resulted in the death of a civilian motorist.<sup>1</sup> For the SJPD, expressing the very real weight of the agency’s regret meant addressing the shortcomings that allowed malicious, incompetent, or ineffective personnel to stay on the payroll—a search that repeatedly circled back to the training and onboarding of new hires.

1. While accidents en route to emergencies are an unfortunate reality of high-speed driving, the non-emergency aspect of this situation, paired with the rookie’s senseless risk-taking, change the nuance of the situation (San Jose Police Department, n.d.).

Almost 50 years later, it is hard to find a law enforcement professional who is not aware of the Field Training and Evaluation Program (FTEP), and it is nearly as difficult to find one whose early career was not shaped by its tenets.<sup>2</sup> While it would be insensitive to denote as good any outcome stemming from the death of an innocent person, it is, nevertheless, accurate to call the SJPD's actions resulting from the 1970 tragedy effort both effective and unprecedented. Frequently called "FTO" in law enforcement circles, the program pairs up new hires with established colleagues, known as Field Training Officers, who dispense instruction and mentorship to the rookie, as well as performance evaluations to the agency.<sup>3</sup> From providing new officers more structure, to lending the agency more control over their early development, even the highest-level description of this process implies drastic improvement over the chaotic sink-or-swim onboarding methodologies used in the past.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about field training programs (called "FTPs" in this paper to denote the SJPD's original program and others that have arisen since its creation) is the amount of time it took a model in its cast to emerge and propagate. For agencies, the need to efficiently find, train, and retain quality personnel has long been a constant, as has local management's need for new hires to become self-sufficient contributors as quickly as possible. Likewise, one would think the public's distaste for bad cops—and their willingness to express extreme displeasure when misbehaviors emerge—would serve as a natural limiter to a system that takes officers directly from the academy and gives them free reign on the street. Sink-or-swim style tactics may have been more credible and widespread in the decades leading up to the 1970s, but it is similarly difficult to imagine decision-makers of the era—many of them having hired in under the same policies and systems—thinking an officer could be taken direct from academy and set to work without a period of monitored acclimatization.

There is also a common line of thinking among skilled professionals that training cannot teach you everything. This is the reason states require physicians to spend three-plus years in residency and why professionals in other roles, including lawyers and nurse practitioners, routinely opt to do the same without a legal requirement. If law enforcement professionals are not subject to the same academic or field-knowledge requirements as the average doctor, they do share a government-mandated requirement to serve in limited capacity in many states. As above, no stakeholder with law enforcement experience would enact or follow policy that assumed a rookie with academy training and no real experience was ready for unassisted fieldwork. For that matter, it is hard to imagine that an

2. While it is unclear precisely how many agencies utilize policy shaped by FTO or its derivatives, numerous states have laws mandating some level of related training; more, the SJPD says their groundbreaking model is the "FTO model of choice for the majority of law enforcement agencies" (San Jose Police Department, n.d.).
3. Though the acronym stands for Field Training Officer, it is widely used to describe the entire field training process, and the officers themselves, a point of confusion for outsiders and rookies themselves (San Jose Police Department, n.d.)

academy-fresh rookie would be thrilled if they were handed a set of cruiser keys and sent off on a beat their very first day.

Thus, SJPD's biggest innovation in introducing FTPEP came not from materializing a new concept, but from testing, refining, and formalizing a process so necessary to modern law enforcement that it feels like it has been there since the beginning. The practice's unique space in the middle of the officer-education funnel reflects a best-of-both-worlds approach, giving agencies a chance to frame instruction their new hires have already received and present new data in a setting where everything taught has relevance. Its post at the front end of every officer's career, meanwhile, affords an immense dual responsibility. Aside from identifying and removing those with unsuitable temperaments for the job that have passed through the academy, the process shapes and colors most every working officer's perception of their chosen field. By this measure, a spring day in 1970, indistinct on the surface and invisible amongst more famous dates, reflects one of the most impactful days in law enforcement history.

## **Sink, Swim, or Succeed: Strengths of FTPs help departments mitigate risk of—and from—bad hires**

Today, FTPs operate at massive scale and play a role in so many officers' careers that it would take pages just to list the areas in which it holds some measure of influence. Many of these areas of influence become apparent in their absence, such as when one examines the bureaucratic conundrum and the various hurdles thrown in the path of San Jose law enforcement in the months leading up to the fateful 1970 incident.

Key to this discussion is the premise that officers are hard to fire or hard to discipline, a notion that—as any experienced supervisor will wearily attest—may be correct some small percentage of the time, but is wholly inaccurate the rest. This viewpoint is generally due to sensational media coverage or false assumptions leveraged by law enforcement critics.<sup>4</sup> By all accounts, SJPD decision makers in 1970 experienced both sides of the issue when they hired the problematic officer. Department superiors soon noticed that his outward passion for the field masked a “temperament unsuitable for police work” [sic] and a deficiency in certain skills needed to perform reliably as an officer. Compounding matters, the sparse official treatment newcomers did receive were not focused towards identification or elimination of undesirable traits. Officers arriving from a two-week

4. Another example: The incorrect notion that paid administrative leave is little more than a vacation for the afflicted officer, an inaccurate criticism that fails to account the rigors the affected officer must endure throughout the leave and the various challenges they face upon return (Guffy et. al, 2008).

orientation would be given training from a senior officer “in the daily tasks of being a police officer,” then left for sink-or-swim-style arms-length observation.

Although the officer, as the article implies, did receive some manner of performance evaluation in his approximately nine months on the job, he did not receive an “improvement needed” classification that would have made it easier to sever the relationship per standard hiring guidelines. When his performance-impacting flaws emerged a short time later, the same job-security measures designed to keep good employees from unfair termination, unfortunately also covered him. In many ways, it was little more than a standard bad hire situation complicated by the relative pressures and responsibilities of the law enforcement industry.

Of course, standard HR tactics meant to combat such problems failed. Reportedly well liked among colleagues and other employees, the officer in question projected an air of friendliness and sociability to go with the false competence that worked to get him past the “improvement needed” stage.

A lack of past documentation on the officer may explain the San Jose model’s contemporary enthusiasm for personnel records. A defining characteristic of the SJPD’s creation, these documents are completed by the FTO at daily and weekly intervals, culminating with a final report at the end of the new hire’s phase with their current officer. Their exact makeup may depend on the department, the FTO’s primary duty when serving in a training capacity, the agency’s areas of focus, or other local factors, but all formats tend to be broad in scope and deep in required coverage. The FTO may record observations on driving skills, soft skills such as demeanor with the public and decorum in private situations, and 15-20 more performance areas in a single shift, for instance.

Their depth of the data and the frequency with which it is collected make Daily Observation Reports (DOR) extremely useful in identifying unsuitable candidates who manage to get through the application, interview, and academy processes. Small inconsistencies an otherwise strong candidate displays in front of different individuals may appear minor to the individual trainer but sum up to a compelling narrative thread in combination, prompting deeper scrutiny. The same thought applies to minor outbursts and other traits that run contrary to a department’s ethos and persona. Elsewhere, a FTO who notices a subtly destructive trait such as the SJPD officer’s temperament could clue in officers who review them later, leading them to observations they may have missed without the initial nudge.

Compared to the limited “daily tasks” training incoming SJPD officers received prior to 1972, the biggest benefit of field training immediately after academy is that officers in a field-based program experience their new industry with added protection, more instruction, and a greater sense of moderation. For departments to provide less is to ignore the critical and highly distinct roles training and early experience play in the formation of quality law enforcement personnel—and to invite problems that are more likely to end in trouble and tragedy than industry-wide adulation.

Agencies that do endeavor to add field training have much to gain in terms of identifying, mitigating, and sidestepping emergent bad hire problems. From this perspective, a competent FTP inserts a new layer of quality control deeper into the hiring process, funneling valid hires towards their posts more skilled and confident than ever, and everyone else back towards the door—and the people administering the policy matter every bit as much to this process as the rules under which they work.

## **Exploring the role and contributions—and critical importance—of FTOs in modern law enforcement**

A large majority of states enforce laws requiring new hires to undergo at least some level of peer-led shadowing and oversight. These departments may train their officers through an official FTEP set forth by the SJPD, a modified take on the model’s principles designed by either the agency itself or a third-party collaborator, or one of the alternatives put forth by non-SJPD entities.

The factors above make it all but certain that most officers spend most of their first year, and sometimes longer, learning under a series of FTOs. Habits are molded, best practices are ingrained, experiences are curated, and assumptions are influenced by a choice of phrasing or a decision to overlook one topic in favor of another. Lessons from training, necessarily dispensed in broad terms from the academy instructor’s podium, see their first translation to the real world under the field trainer’s watch. This organic process, in which overt instruction, unspoken signals, and unintended messages alike all add to the field trainee’s performance, are evaluated innumerable times per shift.

Spread across all new hires under an FTO’s watch, law enforcement professional and YouTube personality Brandon Kondo says that scope and context create an environment wherein Field Training Officers can exert influence as subtle as it is substantial over their workplace, given enough time and a measure of success in the role.<sup>5</sup> The outcome Kondo describes is

5. Kondo, who goes by “Officer401” on YouTube, claimed part of his success on the force came from experiencing multiple management styles and their demands from the onset: Some trainers were lax and easygoing, while others chastised him for travelling 2 mph over the limit in his cruiser (Kondo, 2019).

not implicitly negative. To the contrary, he says, the agency and a trusted selection of veteran, respected field trainers can engineer improvements to departmental culture that pay dividends for years to come. In planning these moves, the agency should pay special attention to some specific areas, notably burnout and compassion fatigue, qualifications, diversity, and compensation.

### **Unnecessary Exposure to Negativity**

Burnout is a sad and rampant reality in law enforcement. In a real sense, FTOs represent a way to get out in front of the problem by choosing trainers with relatively positive attitudes on top of more specific qualifications. The trainers can then provide framing and strategy to their trainees from the earliest days of their careers, offsetting the unpleasant things a young officer will inevitably encounter and potentially instilling an optimistic attitude linked to numerous health and professional benefits.<sup>6</sup> Instead of attempting to “sell” a viewpoint, FTOs should grant guidance for challenges encountered during training and forewarning for those that will inevitably occur in the new officer’s career; they can also share positive aspects of the career that might not immediately occur to a fresh hire.

6. Researchers in one study noted “significant positive correlation” between on-the-job optimism and psychological wellbeing, a factor itself linked to better job performance and physical health—meaning a positive outlook can pay dividends across the department (Pahdy, 2015).

### **FTO Team Qualifications**

A good field trainer shines when it comes to the intangibles. Bill Harvey, a semi-retired police chief with roughly 25 years of applicable work experience, says that a qualified FTO generally passes as the sharpest person in the room and understands, inherently and thoroughly, the importance of “walking the walk” as a leader, mentor, and developer of rookies. Making the effort to retain the skills when found (along with holding high standards and a long view when it comes to building the roster) will eventually have a large, positive impact on the agency’s health. Considering the impact one good manager can have on performance in law enforcement, it is easy to see how a small force of qualified candidates serving as first point of contact could shape crops of rookies.<sup>7</sup>

7. In the UK, a near-plural percentage of officers in one study said managers had a direct, substantial impact on their job perception and performance (Dobby, n.d.).

### **Diverse Leadership**

For agencies following the San Jose method, new officers will spend a preset amount time with each FTO before cycling over to another in a corresponding phase. Just as a private-sector business may wish to keep multiple management styles on-deck, stakeholders may wish to choose qualified FTOs with different personalities, leadership styles, and even values to gain a fuller perspective of the rookie and—as Kondo notes in the video above—rookies a fuller perspective of the attitudes and personalities they will encounter from their colleagues. By contrast, choosing a similar

lot of attitudes may prove problematic. For example, a group of FTOs with great qualifications but “people-pleasing” attitudes could ostensibly overlook negative traits as a means of pleasing their superiors or the trainees themselves happy; offsetting this set of traits with a sterner FTO less concerned about these matters, then, only makes sense.

## **Compensation**

It is the sad and unfair nature of public service that FTOs often do not make extra money commensurate with the immense value they give their departments. Thus, agencies that can afford a few extra dollars per hour for their field trainers would be well advised to consider the option. Mr. Harvey’s edict that they become change agents perhaps intentionally ignores the very real monotony of asking one’s rookie to redo a form the fourth time because he once again signed his name on the wrong line. If possible, they should not have to champion the change that implies that added responsibility is not worth additional compensation.

With or without the presence of extra funds, agencies should also take strides to bolster the group’s value in prestige. While simply keeping a strong roster for an extended period will do much in this regard, FTO groups have the added bonus of success by association. Over time, a combination of the right people should soon draw inquiries from others with the right attitude and qualifications.

## **Reno Model, other takes on FTO, provide alternatives to FTEP’s original innovations**

While there is no way to determine the precise percentage of departments using FTEP, SJPD websites calling it the “FTO model of choice for the majority of law enforcement agencies” would presumably only account for officially trained organizations utilizing the sanctioned version of the training. Under that standard, variations devised to address perceived shortcomings or to suit individual training habits and rookie onboarding processes would also account for some percentage of FTO-using departments.

In terms of notable downsides, Gary Loos, an officer and field trainer with over 30 years of law enforcement experience, notes—among other criticisms—that the baseline model gives stakeholders with non-performance incentives too much power to allow new hires through the gate. For example, a manager concerned about the cost of finding new hires might shift weak or unqualified candidates to FTOs “known for

their good nature and attitude,” who could then pass every trainer under their watch, according to Loos’s analysis.<sup>8</sup> Because of this, organizations concerned primarily with quality of hires may wish to plug a trusted, impartial “quality control officer” in at various points of the FTP process. By Loos’s example, simply monitoring performance indicators such as pass/fail rate may be useful in identifying the agency’s best trainers and uncovering those who could use extra education in the program’s purpose and ultimate goals.

Though small, alterations like these help agencies tailor the FTP process to a field training regiment suitable for local needs and capabilities. Others yet may remain close to the original program tonally, but alter the mechanics, switching up the number of weeks an officer is in field training, placing hard limits on the number of trainees an FTP can handle at once, or making other changes under the hood.

As stated above, full alternatives to FTEP—as opposed to alterations—are presumably less common in law enforcement, likely because it is easier and more logical to modify a process one’s organization has already learned than to pick up something entirely new. The so-called “Reno Model” Police Training Program (PTO), almost certainly the most widely used alternative in the US, believes based on training sessions that “hundreds of agencies, perhaps more than 1000” subscribe to their model, for instance.

Like any training program in any context, the Reno Model comes with its own distinct set of strengths and weaknesses. For offices with more progressive-minded training and education policies, its focus on problem-based learning (PBL) may make it an attractive alternative. By the same token, the model is also built to interlock with the community-oriented policing concept, giving up more rigorous training and documentation demands for an open-ended approach that allows trainers and trainees to identify and work on problem areas as they go. The latter attribute in particular has earned the model praise and scorn from various corners of the law enforcement industry, with proponents claiming the open-ended, learning-based approach is more customizable to the individual and critics wondering whether a lack of clear standards may open organizations to legal action from disgruntled former (read: failed) new hires.<sup>9</sup> As a response, the model’s creators claim that both FTEP and the Reno Model have attrition rates of roughly 15 percent, and that current legal precedent supporting FTEP would also work in the newer model’s favor.

As observant readers may have noted, the original FTEP, modification thereof, and “full” alternatives all start with the same foundation: putting newly-hired and -trained officers on the job with established colleagues,

8. Loos also advises that supervisors undertake a “field training officer management program,” allowing personnel higher in the chain of command to support, monitor, and observe the officers responsible for shaping new hires (Loos, n.d.).

9. In general, training expert John Bowden claims the FTEP’s tenets, applied properly, are strong enough to be modified to most any situation, making variations on the model arguably stronger than sets of pre-existing modifications found in alternative models. His sentiment largely mirrors that of other experts, who cite on-the-job realities of policework and litigation issues as leading reasons to “build up” from FTEP (Bowden, n.d.).

thus allowing the newcomers to absorb the field from a curated, controlled standpoint. The same foundation applies at some level to mentorships, apprenticeships, and shadowing programs seen across private and public enterprise. Thus, whether an organization applies strictly to the FTEP, uses one of the alternatives noted in this paper, or develops their own program from the ground up, they will likely start with this idea and build out—suggesting perhaps that FTEP tackles the problem of new-hire education so well in part because it tackled the problem first.

## **Enhancing field training and assisting officers with the help of technology**

With multiple traits important to a field training officer’s survival, a sample DOR out of Maryland—formed in the image of the SJPD’s FTEP—underpins the intensity of an FTO’s responsibilities. More, it exemplifies an aspect of the job that has almost no capacity to scale. Every rookie who arrives from the academy is another document to complete, performance to review, and another file to add to the growing stack the agency builds up nightly.

As noted above, these papers are not of the “file-and-forget” variety. Depending on the model used and department-specific policy, every DOR a corps of FTOs generates may cross the training rookie’s desk, their immediate supervisor’s, the supervisor’s superior’s, and—in offices where FTO performance is put under documented scrutiny—end up reviewed by field training leadership for performance review or metrics creation. The sheer logistics implied here can create an administrative snag. Storing, ordering, and disseminating the appropriate field training documents to the appropriate personnel, then ensuring all relevant commentary and analysis is centralized, becomes more difficult with each successive desk added to the chain of command. Subsequently, each employee generating and reviewing documents in the chain becomes subject to greater work stress with each hiring glut and budget increase; excessive paperwork has long been noted as a source of workplace turmoil, and law enforcement professionals are not immune to it.<sup>10</sup>

Following this, it is not entirely surprising that contemporary attempts to modernize field training programs largely focus on the way existing work is carried out. For example, the SJPD resource linked above claims its efforts to translate the DOR process into a decentralized, cloud-based platform represent “the most significant change” to the method in some time. Elsewhere in the industry, general-purpose software expressly designed to support various field training practices attempts to apply the

10. Research undertaken following the 9/11 attacks suggests that excessive paperwork is an inherent organizational stressor that, at its worse, can compound against other common forms of stress. Thus, extra paperwork itself is bad—extra paperwork during a time of added workplace stress is worse (The Trauma Center, n.d.).

same idea in a more modifiable shell: personnel can design their own digital field training documents based on existing paper forms; field trainers can fill out daily observations via smartphone or laptop, thus removing their reliance (and need to carry) the cumbersome clipboard from scene to scene; supervisors can log into a portal and view digital copies of every recommendation, praise, and point of improvement without emailing to request a fax or waiting on tomorrow's stack of papers to hit the desk.

Agencies wishing to derive more value from their ongoing digitization efforts may best benefit from the presence of an upgraded training management system (TMS). The best products in this category offer the same customizable documents, cloud access, and platform accessibility and marry it with connectivity to larger recordkeeping procedure. For instance, field trainers can attach a rookie's DORs to the same file housing their academy records, performance reviews, disciplinary histories, and other paperwork that would historically go in the officer's ongoing paper file.

In essence, this adds a new layer of convenience, bypassing the need to force personnel to log into a separate digital "silo" specifically used for training records. Other training records are similarly kept in the same place, thus easing management throughout the oversight-heavy early months of an officer's career and transitioning as they become full-fledged officers in the field. While tools designed specifically for field training purposes are certainly useful, especially as compared to manual processes, the added seamlessness of a TMS can further ease a repetitive, often frustrating administrative task in juggling paperwork across a corps of rookies—a particularly compelling feature for organizations in need of upgraded training, record keeping, and field training solutions.

## **Conclusion: FTPs remain a vital addition 50 years later**

It took the San Jose Police Department some time to study and refine the process that began in 1970. The program that emerged from their effort in 1972 was nothing short of revolutionary, a fact made obvious by sheer adoption. Between primary adopters of the San Jose model, agencies that modified the program to their needs, and larger-scale adaptations that utilize the same basic tenets, it is fair to say the SJPd has touched the career of almost every law enforcement officer working today.

Perhaps more impressive, although the SJPd and others have continually tweaked the FTP since release, the bones of the process have remained the

same for 40-plus years. At minimum, this speaks to the process's alignment with both common sense and the average law enforcement agency's needs. While most agencies would likely deduce that experienced front-liners are good role models and sources of information, formalizing and legitimizing the process gave it legs and staying power.

Wherever the idea of field training goes in the future, one can only assume it will look close to the practice agencies utilize today. While making it part of the larger LMS and moving it to cloud may put the practice in a flashier, more functional shell, there is no need to reinvent the wheel—and even less reason to restructure a practice that has already proven effective for so long.

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To cite this article: Envisage Technologies. "Law Enforcement and Field Training: The Evolution of a Decades-Old Process for Modern Departments" [www.envisagenow.com/FTO](http://www.envisagenow.com/FTO), 14 May 2019.

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