

Oly's Training Shake-Up

Good timing, bad disasters, federal funds & local bonds help a Washington State fire department build a synergistic training center.

BY PAT DALE

In this installment of Command Training, the Olympia (Wash.) Fire Department describes how serendipity, an earthquake and a generous bond from its citizens helped them build a great hands-on training center and a top-notch CTC. The department now has the ultimate campus and can seamlessly link the strategic and task levels in a pretty unique way. If your department is considering its own command training center or is simply looking for ways to link command training with the task-level, hands-on stuff, read on to learn how the folks in Olympia made it happen.

The City of Olympia Fire Department (OFD) is an all-career department with 81 members in operations and 96 members total. The department deploys four engines, one ladder truck, two medic units and a battalion unit. The engines and truck are staffed with three firefighters and an officer, while the medic units are staffed with two firefighter/paramedics. At minimum staffing, there is a full complement of 20 members on duty. OFD covers approximately 25 square miles and in 2013, responded to 11,266 calls for service. Olympia, Wash., is the capital of Washington State, which presents some complex challenges with large fluctuations in population due to the legislative session, as well as significant political demonstrations and protests on the capitol campus aimed at government and the lawmakers.

In this article, I will explain OFD's journey in envisioning, planning, building and launching our own regional Command Training Center (CTC). I will also describe how we link command training with task-level, hands-on drills to create realistic training scenarios.

It All Started with an Earthquake

Olympia, Wash., is in earthquake country. When the magnitude 6.8 Nisqually earthquake struck our region on Feb. 28, 2001, it caused citywide damage to homes, businesses and roads. The Fourth Avenue Bridge, part of a major east/west corridor, suffered severe damage, which rendered it impassable by large vehicles. Olympia is bisected by a waterway that is part of Puget Sound's most southern tip. When the earthquake took out the Fourth Avenue Bridge, Station 2, our westside station, got cut off from the downtown core and OFD headquarters. Firefighters at Station 2 could find themselves alone at working structure fires for unacceptable periods of time without support from additional companies. Our only solution was to staff an additional fire company at



The Nisqually earthquake in 2001 left severely damaged the Fourth Avenue Bridge, leaving OFD's Station 2 isolated. The department managed by staffing an additional crew at the station at all times.

this station, utilizing overtime pay. This continued for more than six months.

The Funding

Three years following the Nisqually earthquake (and after providing an enormous amount of documentation), the City of Olympia received reimbursement from FEMA for operational impacts incurred from the quake. Although the FEMA reimbursement went to the city's general fund, OFD received a portion of it to compensate for the overtime paid to staff Station 2 after the bridge closure. The timing couldn't have been any better. I had recently returned from visiting the Phoenix Fire Department's Command Training Center. After seeing this dynamic, effective training program, I returned to my department eager to share the training strategies and tactics—even if the only tools I had were rudimentary simulations and static photos. I had begun conducting initial training in the basement of our city's public works department, which housed a dozen computers typically used for training city employees. It was a crude, yet functional, version of a CTC. I had been hoping to obtain funds to create a fully functioning CTC for our department, and I just happened to be sitting in the chief's office when he got word about our portion of the reimbursement. We saw an opportunity to create our own CTC, and decided it could potentially have an immensely positive impact on our operations. We used the funds to remodel a vacant city fire station that had been used for city storage. We were on our way to building our own CTC!

The FEMA funding did not pay for everything. To furnish the CTC, I had to beg for and borrow equipment, furnishings and hardware. I went to the state government surplus and obtained student kiosks and chairs. I purchased computers culled from our city inventory, as they had met their replacement lifecycle. I utilized old-model portable radios as they were replaced and personally spent weekends with my son stringing computer cable and wiring for the computer set up. The very model of a grass roots effort.

Our initial training in our CTC yielded great results. To begin, I selected a line-of-duty death case study that matched similar risks found within our city. We then created simulations to run scenarios with on-duty crews. As the operations chief, I loved having the opportunity to discuss the scenarios in order to standardize our operations, and our firefighters were equally enjoying going through the scenarios. We progressed leaps-and-bounds toward truly standardizing our department's operations, rather than each shift essentially functioning like a separate fire department. However, I felt two elements were missing:



OFD's first "real" CTC had a simple start. It lived in an old fire station that got a remodel, thanks to some FEMA funds.



OFD's latest CTC has several computer kiosks, a replica command vehicle and plenty of classroom space.



Olympia's regional training center has external video monitors so visiting agencies can utilize their own command vehicles for simulations and training.



- Curriculum. We lacked a true curriculum to provide a basis of instruction for our simulations.
- A way to connect the strategic level with hands-on, task-level training. A system that allowed us to blend strategic-level, command training with physical, hands-on tactical drills would create the most realistic experience.

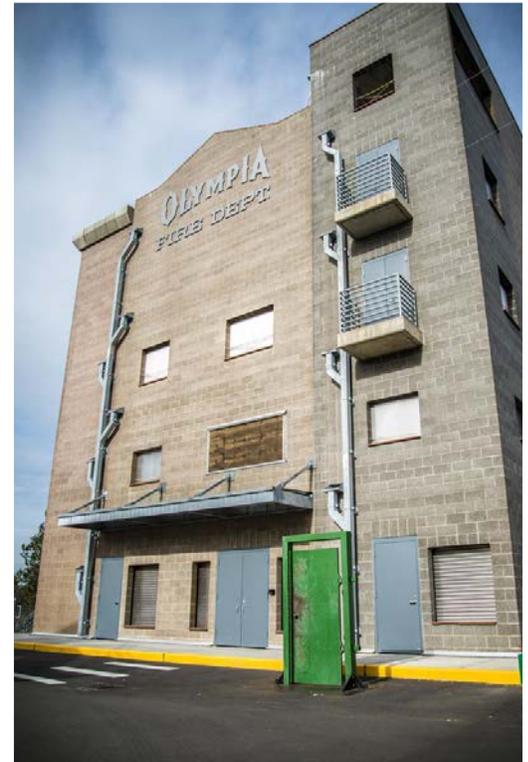
A Regional Perspective

As we worked toward building a curriculum, we developed a partnership with a local community college—Bates Technical College—to make our command training available to other fire departments. Working with the college, I developed a task book modeled after those used by the wildland firefighting community. Although it wasn't truly a training curriculum, it did provide a method to match performance with a standard set of objectives. Training through the community college fostered a regional perspective, helped to spread the word about our CTC and, given that we are a municipality, provided us a way to offer the training to departments within our region. Having neighboring fire departments train with us at our CTC helped us develop common terms and tactics for incident response. Working with the community college provided assistance with the logistical and financial management piece of the puzzle. Members from area fire departments registered and paid for the training through Bates, and course instructors were paid through the college, as well. Bates benefited by further fostering relationships with the local fire-service community.

For several years, we continued operating our CTC with this “rough” curriculum. I eventually checked out the Blue Card Training & Certification program, which was born from concepts developed at the Phoenix Fire Department's CTC. Blue Card is loaded with time-tested curriculum. Just what we needed! In 2010, I became a certified Blue Card Instructor (instructor No. 31!) so I could begin implementing Blue Card for the members of OFD, including plans to train and certify our officers.

Our neighboring fire department, Lacey Fire District 3, also adopted Blue Card with us. Since we didn't have access to unlimited overtime (insert laughter here), we defined the following process to implement Blue Card training for members of both departments:

1. We certified the battalion chiefs as Blue Card trainers.
2. We gave all officers a three-month period to complete the online training portion of the program. We certified the officers while on duty at our CTC (eliminating overtime costs).
3. We began member training. We formed training groups of 10 by combining a fire company from Olympia, a fire company from Lacey, and a medic unit.
4. We utilized an on-duty battalion chief from Olympia and an on-duty battalion chief from Lacey as instructors for the simulation training.



Top: A panoramic view of Olympia's Mark Noble Regional Fire Training Center. The campus is named after a local firefighter who died from a duty-related brain tumor.

Bottom: The six-story commercial tower features multiple entry points and complex room-search areas.

This process took approximately a year to accomplish because it was completed while on-duty and in-service. During this same time period, I began the process of introducing Blue Card to the departments within our county.

A New Training Model

Timing (and luck) continued to be on our side as we moved forward. In 2009, the citizens of Olympia had passed a bond measure that included the construction of a new regional fire-training center. Named the Mark Noble Regional Fire Training Center, the facility has a six-story commercial training tower, which includes a propane burn prop for live fire training; a two-story residential tower and ventilation props. As we built the new training facility, we seized the opportunity to redesign, relocate and further develop our CTC—complete with simulation lab and classroom. The entire process, including design, bid proposals and construction, took approximately three years. The entire campus opened in January 2012. In the two years since, we have trained dozens of departments and hundreds of firefighters.

The new CTC's location at our regional training center is a pivotal part of its success. Co-locating the training props and CTC inspired a unique training model. As I stated earlier, one aspect that we lacked previously was a way to support the CTC's strategic-level simulation training with hands-on drills. Our new training method combines strategic- and task-level training in the following way:

1. We begin each quarter with a new simulation in the CTC. We bring the instructors (battalion chiefs and training officers) together to standardize tactics and model of deployment. This serves as the strategic-level instructor training.

2. We run on-duty crews through the simulations for the first six weeks of the quarter.

3. Next, we provide instructor training for the live-fire-training instructors using the same simulation used in the CTC. We "overlay" the simulation onto one of our drill props.

4. We then conduct live-fire training utilizing the scenario that had been used in the strategic-level training for the first six weeks of the quarter. For example, the hands-on scenario begins with the first-arriving company laying supply line and giving the initial radio report, exactly the way it was previously performed in the CTC. Then, the



Co-locating the CTC with the hands-on training center allows a synergistic training experience where the strategic and task levels meet.



The training center's drill tower has 8,500 square feet of training space and houses a live-fire training prop.



From its truly humble beginnings, the Olympia CTC has grown into a regional gem that helps train hundreds of firefighters.

attack lines are laid while the officer performs a 360. Once complete, the IC gives a 360 follow-up report. The scenario continues with the initial IC assigning units until the battalion chief arrives and a command transfer takes place. Again, the scenario is performed to match the CTC simulation exactly.

We have literally opened the bay door at the CTC, pushed (figuratively) the simulation onto the drill ground and followed the strategic-level training with hands-on, task-level training that matches the strategic level. Just what we were lacking previously. The strategic-level and task-level training complement each other. The overall result is noticeably improved operations at our incident scenes. As an operations chief, this is the best outcome possible.

Lessons Learned

We were fortunate to have FEMA funds to build our first CTC. We are also very fortunate that the citizens of Olympia continued to support us by passing a bond to pay for our new training center, including a new CTC.

Curriculum is necessary to provide the highest level of command training. Currently, Blue Card provides the most robust and dynamic curriculum for command training and certification. When designing a CTC, it's important to consider the type of curriculum you will use. A solid curriculum with help set expectations and ensure consistency in training.

One of the most challenging aspects of this journey has been adopting Blue Card within our county. Some agencies have adopted the program, while others have remained resistant. My approach: I gave the operations chiefs at nearby departments an overview of the program. Next, I gave the County Fire Chiefs Association an overview, discussed my desire to adopt and implement the program and explained why I believed it was the right choice for our county. It is key to "localize" the program to department-specific deployment models. To accomplish this, I formed a group of response chiefs and training officers to develop best practices for our county. This process worked quite well. Finally, I encouraged the adoption and implementation within the departments that were ready to proceed. Although this seemed to be a logical progression, it was not without hurdles and came with more than a few bruises. I now refer to the Blue Card Program as the "black-and-blue card" program. **BS**



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For more information on the Mark Noble Regional Fire Training Center and the command training center, please visit:

<http://olympiawa.gov/city-services/fire-department/fire-training-center>