

HALTON POLICE LAUNCH VIRTUAL-REALITY TRAINING PROGRAM

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Halton police will soon be using virtual reality to teach officers how to de-escalate crisis situations.

The new training program, which was developed in partnership with public-safety technology company Axon, was recently unveiled at Halton police headquarters during a news conference.

The virtual reality (VR) program will supplement existing training and will see officers enter a virtual world where they respond to a person in crisis.

"Every year our officers attend approximately 3,500 calls for service that involve someone in crisis," said Halton Police Deputy Chief Roger Wilkie.

"These calls are incredibly challenging and unpredictable. This is why the Halton police have worked so diligently over the years to develop a robust mental health training curricula that best positions our front-line members to respond to these high-stake calls."

The Axon VR program, which Halton police are the first police service in Canada to use, puts trainees in



Nikki Wesley/Torstar

Reporter David Lea tries the virtual reality training simulation with the Oculus GO headset.

the shoes of both the person in crisis and the officer responding to the call.

The VR is immersive: look to the side, and you can see your partner; look behind you, and you can see nearby houses.

An Oculus Go headset puts the wearer in the pre-recorded video scenario where the choices made determine the ultimate outcome.

The scenarios include:

- Responding to a person in crisis who has autism
- Responding to a person in crisis who has schizophrenia
- Responding to a person who is suicidal

For the schizophrenia scenario, you begin by seeing through the eyes of a man in crisis who is on his front lawn, ranting about some conspiracy as his mother frantically attempts to calm him down.

Looking down at your hand, and you realize you are holding a screwdriver.

You are further disturbed by the bright lights and sirens of an approaching police cruiser.

At this point, your perspective changes and you are now seeing through the eyes of one of the responding officers.

The scenario then freezes, and the wearer is given

the first choice concerning how to proceed: "Talk to him" or "Make him drop the screwdriver."

Selecting "Talk to him" results in the officer assuring the man that he's not in trouble and that he hasn't done anything wrong.

The officer politely asks the man to drop the screwdriver, which he does.

The officer also instructs his partner to shut off the lights on the cruiser, which are upsetting the man.

Other choices follow, and by opting to keep the situation calm, the man eventually consents to being assessed by medical professionals.

When asked what would have happened if the "Make him drop the screwdriver" option had been chosen, Sgt. Dave Preece of the Halton police training bureau says the officers would have drawn either a firearm or Taser on the man, which does little to achieve the de-escalation goal for the scenario.

"I have personally experienced the virtual reality scenarios, and I will tell you that this initiative is a game changer for the policing sector," said Wilkie.

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- Deputy Chief Roger Wilkie

say is that this partnership with Axon will bolster community safety and well-being for the residents of Halton region as we leverage technology to better meet the training needs of our officers and ultimately enhance service delivery to our community."

Wilkie also talked about the importance of that portion of the scenario where the trainee sees from the point of view of the person in crisis.

He said getting officers to look at crisis situations from a different perspective allows them to be more prepared and understand how best to engage that person.

"Having an officer aware of what lights and sirens can do to someone's mindset or of different barriers or noise around the person that can impact their ability or willingness to engage

with the officers — when you start with that perspective, it changes the way you approach and enter into dialogue with the person in crisis," said Wilkie.

The deputy chief said currently officers engage in crisis de-escalation training through role playing, which, he noted, can be inconsistent, depending on the actors involved.

He said the VR scenarios provide that consistency and standardization.

When asked about the cost of the program, Wilkie said it was negligible.

He said Halton police have received 20 Oculus Go headsets from Axon at a cost of less than \$1,000 each.

Wilkie anticipates more VR scenarios will be created to train officers in areas of judgment and more.

The VR training will begin in January 2020.

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