

Mock Prison Riot Prepares Corrections Staff for Potential Incidents

By Cynthia R. Barone, Sharon Goudy and David Fialkoff

Authors' Note: Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Prison personnel must be ready to respond to all types of emergency situations, including a violent prisoner uprising. Fortunately, most correctional staff have never actually been involved in such an incident. So how can they be prepared should such an event suddenly occur at their facility? One way is by practicing at a realistically staged event designed to present, as closely as possible, the kinds of issues personnel may encounter during an actual prison riot.

The Mock Prison Riot has been staged annually, in April or May, since 1997 on the grounds of the former West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville. The event is a program of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), Office of Science and Technology, and an initiative of the West Virginia High Technology Consortium (WVHTC) Foundation. The mock riot is like no other law enforcement training in the world, facilitating the marriage of technologies and end-users under the most realistic conditions possible.

The first mock riot, in 1997, lasted one day. Today, the event is a four-day, comprehensive law enforcement and corrections tactical and technology experience, that includes 44,000 square feet of exhibit space; training scenarios; technology demonstrations; technology assessments and evaluations; certification workshops; a skills competition; and multiple opportunities for feedback, networking and camaraderie.

In 1997, there were four law enforcement and corrections technologies showcased, and 70 people

attended; in 2007, 1,687 participants from 36 states participated and 84 technologies were on display. In 2008, 39 states were represented as well as eight countries, including the Bahamas, Canada, El Salvador, Ireland, Norway, Singapore, the United Kingdom and Venezuela. Other countries that have participated include Austria, Brazil, Hong Kong and Israel. In 2007-2008, teams from Canada and Singapore executed training scenarios.

The core components of the Mock Prison Riot are:

- The technology showcase, where exhibitors come from all across the country and around the world to display the newest cutting-edge law enforcement and corrections (LEC) technologies. Special emphasis is placed on technology areas designated by NIJ as high priority. Exhibitors say the feedback they receive from end-users regarding their technologies is critical to the product development process;
- Numerous free workshops on LEC technologies, tactics and topics, many of which result in certification. This component of the mock riot has saved LEC agencies across the country and the world tens of thousands of dollars in the past 12 years;
- Training scenarios, the component that really sets the mock riot apart from other trade shows. In this environment, practitioners can actually touch, see, feel and deploy technologies from the showcase in training scenarios they design. All areas of the prison are used: chow hall, cell blocks, recreation yards, infirmary, etc.; and

- Technology demonstrations, in which technologists present their products directly to practitioners, allowing for immediate and candid feedback. Much like the showcase, exhibitors participating in technology demonstrations report that the feedback from end-users is invaluable, often resulting in savings of both time and money. Formal technology operational assessments are also offered.

In addition, each year a separate skills competition is held to test skills, training, communication and endurance in such areas as marksmanship, physical fitness and teamwork.

Many first-time attendees find it beneficial to attend the mock riot as observers. They tour the facility and preview all the different technologies and types of scenarios and technologies available. However, new teams or first-time attendees are welcome to execute scenarios. The Mock Prison Riot staff can accommodate the needs of new teams and first-time attendees as well as seasoned teams and returning attendees.

All events at the mock riot are free for participants, exhibitors and observers. (Attendees must pay for their own transportation, lodging and meals.) Teams executing scenarios should bring the equipment they normally use for training. However, there are restrictions and comprehensive safety guidelines, which include no live ammunition, explosive devices, Tasers or chemical agents. For the listing of safety guidelines and requirements, visit www.mockprisonriot.org and look under General Information. Training devices such as flash bangs, inert gas, inert smoke and pepper ball rounds are available for use in scenarios, free of charge, based on availability and participation of exhibitors.

During scenarios, volunteers serve as role players and portray inmates, hostages, correctional officers and other roles. Good role players provide realistic training experiences for participating teams and assist team members in effectively evaluating the technologies they deploy. The combination of venue, training scenarios, technologies, and effective role players results in the most candid and accurate feedback for exhibitors regarding their products.

An example of a typical scenario demonstrates the realism and excitement participants can expect:

Despite the daylight hour, the dining hall of the former West Virginia Penitentiary is fairly dark — dark enough that the inmates there have decided to take advantage of the low light and start a fight. They are throwing whatever they can get their hands on — food, dishes, chairs. One inmate is severely injured and another has taken a hostage and is armed with a shank.

Just outside the west entrance are U.S. Army soldiers from the 705th Military Police Battalion at Ft. Leavenworth, Kan. They have been waiting patiently for their command and now it's go time. They are outfitted with technology that looks like stuff you'd see in a James Bond movie.

A soldier hurls a smoke grenade through the door and the team enters. The smoke is so thick it's hard to see your own hand in front of your face. The inmates are disoriented but still fighting. The Army is not deterred. In less than a minute, all the inmates are on the floor and following orders from the soldiers to comply. The injured inmate is evacuated and the hostage taker is disarmed.

The mock riot is not open to the general public. Only law enforcement and corrections practitioners (active or retired), support personnel, and active duty or retired military may attend. Criminal justice students are

admitted if they are enrolled in an accredited college or university and are under the supervision of an instructor or academic official.

The mock riot includes a command march led by the Moundsville Police Department. The procession passes three schools and goes through the Moundsville central business district. Team members wear their duty uniforms, boots, tactical vests and helmets, and canine units are welcome. Since the general public is not permitted at the event, the command march is a way to involve local residents and give them the opportunity to show support for those who keep our country and its communities safe.

Visitors to the Mock Prison Riot Web site, www.mockprisonriot.org, can register online; find directions to the site and full details about scheduled events; and watch a video montage. Teams that want to participate in scenarios or the skills competition should register as soon as possible. These events fill up quickly and every year there is a wait list for participation in scenarios. Those who just want to observe can register any time up to and including the days of the mock riot.

The 2009 Mock Prison Riot is scheduled for May 3-6. For information, exhibitors, media, and VIPs should contact Cindy Barone at 1-888-306-5382; cbarone@mockprisonriot.org. Teams interested in attending and those who want information on scenarios, workshops and the skills competition should contact Sharon Goudy at 1-888-306-5382; sgoudy@mockprisonriot.org.

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