

AG Balderas tests use-of-force simulator, announces new initiatives

LAS CRUCES – New Mexico Attorney General Hector Balderas fastened a firearm holster around his waist and stepped into the role of a law enforcement officer Tuesday as part of a simulated use-of-training at the Doña Ana Community College's East Mesa Campus in Las Cruces.

In one simulation on the 180-degree immersive training platform, Balderas was accompanied by Las Cruces police Sgt. Jaime Quezada, and they encountered a woman being held captive inside a home. Moments later, a suspect brandishing a gun appeared on the three-panel screen and shots rang out.

"That was split-second; that probably cost me my life," Balderas said after the simulation. "This is an invaluable tool. I, as attorney general, have been able to look at shootings in cases from the file perspective and the police report perspective, and now, we're tasked to implement laws. Every lawmaker in communities should go through that full simulation. ... I didn't even have a shot or a chance."

Balderas demonstrated the VirTra 180 LE training system with several law enforcement officials from Las Cruces before attending a board meeting for the New Mexico Law Enforcement Academy, which was held at the East Mesa Campus. Balderas serves as chairman of the NMLEA.

DACC students and officers in the Las Cruces area have used the training system for about three years, according to associate professor Richard G. DeRouen. It uses state-of-the-art technology and simulates a variety of encounters with surround sound, physical dynamics, multiple angles and lighting conditions, as well as weapon-recoil action and fight-back capability. The training, in part, aims to de-escalate use-of-force incidents among officers while on duty.

"One of the essential things that we have to emphasize is communication skills," DeRouen said. "In the world of texting and non-verbal communication, we have to re-emphasize speaking with people, talking with folks."

DeRouen said the training system cost about \$105,000, and the New Mexico State University Police Department donated firearms that were converted into training weapons, including a Taser and two Glock 22 semiautomatic pistols.

A total of 583 people, including students and Las Cruces police officers, have gone through the training over a three-year period, DeRouen said.



Attorney General Hector Balderas speaks during a public safety press conference on Tuesday at Doña Ana Community College. Standing to the right of Balderas is Las Cruces Police Department Chief Jaime Montoya and District Attorney Mark D'Antonio. Following the press conference Balderas tested out a Law Enforcement De-Escalation & Use of Force Simulator. (Photo: Robin Zielinski / Sun-News)

"About two years, all of our officers went through this training. It's very realistic," Las Cruces Police Chief Jaime Montoya said. "There was probably four or five scenarios that my officers went through. It's very realistic because you're not only training your brain, but you're training your body."

Before the demonstration, Balderas announced two new initiatives by his office aimed at making New Mexico safer for its residents.

First, he said, "We are going to be making a substantial investment in the Medicaid fraud investigations capacity of our office in southern New Mexico. We have just received several hundreds of thousands of dollars from the federal government to strengthen and increase Medicaid fraud investigations, so that families aren't harmed."

Balderas said he will be asking state lawmakers to "match that investment" when the Legislature convenes next month in Santa Fe. Lawmakers will only have to match 25 percent of the federal appropriation, he said.

Under this initiative, Balderas said he's hopes to place four staff members in southern New Mexico that would specifically work in Medicaid fraud investigations.

Second, Balderas said he will ask lawmakers to "invest in a mobile forensic laboratory vehicle."

The vehicle would be used in partnership with law enforcement agencies around the state, particularly in rural areas, "so they we can make investigations of bad acts and felony conduct against children a top priority in New Mexico," Balderas said. The vehicle would cost about \$208,000, he said.

"We are asking the Legislature to truly make an investment in public safety first. We can never have prosperous communities until we have truly safe communities," he said. "I'm asking them to look at strategically investing in law enforcement initiatives that will ... make communities safer and ultimately reverse some of the horrific trends in outcomes that are impacting education and our economy in New Mexico. It is really a strategic shift in trying to fight crime in a smarter way."

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Attorney General Hector Balderas tests out a Law Enforcement De-Escalation & Use of Force Simulator on Tuesday at Doña Ana Community College. (Photo: Robin Zielinski / Sun-News)