



# AGENDA REPORT

**TO:** City Council Members

**FROM:** John Alden  
Executive Director, CPRA

**SUBJECT:** OPD POST Virtual Reality Training System  
Grant

**DATE:** February 4, 2021

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**Staff Recommends That The City Council Adopt A Resolution Authorizing The City Administrator Or Designee To Accept On Behalf Of The City Of Oakland A Meggitt Training Systems Virtual Reality Decisions And Tactics Training System From The California Commission On Police Officer Standards And Training (POST) At No Cost To The City Of Oakland**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Police Department has previously brought to the Council a proposed Resolution authorizing the donation of a Virtual Reality (VR) training system to the Department for Oakland police officers. Council has directed the Community Police Review Agency (CPRA) to assess whether this particular VR system supports best practices with regards to de-escalation and elimination of bias in policing. In short, CPRA has found that this system is too adaptable to adequately assess its support for de-escalation and elimination of bias in policing prior to accepting the system, and that the system is too new for any other agency in California to have so assessed it either. However, adoption of this system would allow the City of Oakland to be a leading voice in the state to evaluate this VR system's ability to accomplish those two goals, and provide feedback to POST and the State Legislature on its efficacy.

Staff therefore recommends that the City Council adopt the resolution accompanying the original report in this matter to authorize the VR training system donation from POST to OPD.

## **BACKGROUND / LEGISLATIVE HISTORY**

Working as a Police Officer in Oakland requires dealing with a wide variety of people in different situations that at times present serious risks of bodily harm to both themselves as well as members of the public. Police officers must quickly analyze and solve problems and use skills and training to respond to, and defuse conflict and avoid confrontations whenever possible. Police trainees must be prepared both mentally and physically to respond to calls for service, and Virtual Reality (VR) is one training mode that provides additional capabilities to an already robust training methodology.

In recent years, training of this sort was provided in a closed room, with the officer standing in front of a flat video screen. Older training systems would then play pre-recorded videos

featuring live actors depicting different scenarios officers might encounter in the field. These scenarios included several different, but limited, pre-recorded possible outcomes, depending on the officer's actions. A trainer sitting out of view of the officer could then select one or another pre-recorded outcome for the officer in response to the officer's actions as they watched the screen. While these systems were an improvement over sending an officer straight to training in the field, they were greatly limited by the pre-recorded material provided by the vendor. For example, the voices and faces of the other parties in these scenarios were those of real actors recorded years in advance, and therefore could not be changed to assess bias, or create more varied scenarios. This also limited the ability of police departments to adapt the training curriculum to changes in policy, such as the emphasis on de-escalation created by state law in 2020.

As the Police Department has previously reported, VR training has been shown to increase a student's or trainee's psychological immersion and focus when dealing with real-life virtual situations at hand; by increasing the immersions this process provokes a natural response from the trainee to assist in mental recall therefore enhancing training. This vendor, Meggitt Training Systems (MGT), has over 30 years of validated experience providing training within to law enforcement communities. The product offered in this instance, MGT Decisions and Tactics Training System, consists of a Marksmanship Application (lanes based training that focuses on the fundamentals of weapon handling to replicate the most realistic firearms training) and a Judgmental Application (training to become proficient with weapon handling and deployment in scenarios that test decision making regarding force options and communication skills).

This particular VR system is also much more customizable than the earlier generations of flat-screen video training described above. For example, it allows the trainer to use their own voice and own words to act as one of the participants in the VR scenario in real time as the events unfold for the trainee officer. This allows for more realistic, fluid, and varied communication styles, which both increases the complexity and responsiveness of the training, and can be a tool for assessing bias. The appearance of the other characters can be changed by the trainer to reflect different genders and races, which also can be a strong tool for assessing bias. The system also contains tens of thousands of hours of training scenarios, so the trainer has a great variety of training options from which to choose. In these regards, the system is vastly more customizable and fluid than the systems the Oakland Police Department has used in the past.

At the direction of Council, the CPRA has reached out to sister oversight agencies in several other California jurisdictions about the system. From these contacts, it is clear that no other sister oversight agency has had opportunity to review this particular system. This system is only just now being rolled out across the state, so other agencies to which it had been offered are, like the City of Oakland, just beginning to assess its efficacy.

According to POST, this system was specifically designed to facilitate the de-escalation training mandated by state law in 2020 under SB 230. Funding for the system was shepherded by then-Assemblymember Dr. Shirley Weber, one of the leading legislative proponents of creating a de-escalation requirement in California law. Thus, the origins of this system share the same roots as the City of Oakland's policy commitment to de-escalation and elimination of bias. While these shared goals do not guarantee this VR system actually accomplishes those goals, it does suggest a good-faith effort to meet those goals was likely at the heart of the development of this product.

## **ANALYSIS AND POLICY ALTERNATIVES**

From CPRA's perspective, this VR system is a highly flexible tool. Like many tools, whether it is ultimately used for good or for ill depends largely on the hand that wields it. In other words, this VR system's ability to reinforce de-escalation, or for that matter to undercut de-escalation principles, will depend in significant part on the way the trainer chooses to use it. The same is true as to its ability to eliminate, or exacerbate, bias. This adaptability, and quantity of scenarios already housed in this system, make any further advance assessment of the system impractical in general, but especially so with existing staffing.

That said, moving forward the Police Department, and eventually the new Inspector General required by Measure S1, could periodically assess the efficacy of this system as applied in Oakland to teach de-escalation and to eliminate bias. This may also be an opportunity for the City of Oakland to be a leading voice in the state to provide feedback to POST and the State Legislature as to the value of this tool, and best practices for its use.

There is no current alternative VR system offered by POST. While staff has not directly compared any other specific system in detail, no other known system has been designed to address new California laws regarding de-escalation in the way this system has. Nor has any other free system been offered, so far as CPRA is aware. In the past, earlier generations of such systems came at significant cost.

Thus, the only present Policy Alternative would be non-adoption. This option would leave the Oakland Police Department with a known, but older and less agile, video training tool designed prior to the advent of the state's de-escalation standards. CPRA assesses it is more likely than not that the new VR system offered would be better able to accomplish the goals of teaching de-escalation and elimination of bias, so non-adoption would likely leave the Police Department less able to accomplish these goals.

CPRA therefore concurs with the Police Department in recommending that the Council approve the donation of this VR system to OPD.

## **FISCAL IMPACT**

None identified.

## **PUBLIC OUTREACH / INTEREST**

There was no public outreach required for the preparation of this report beyond standard City Council noticing requirements.

**COORDINATION**

This report was greatly facilitated by the Police Department's transparency about their interactions with POST and their consideration of this donation. CPRA's research on, and assessment of, the system was conducted independently of other City agencies.

**SUSTAINABLE OPPORTUNITIES**

***Economic:*** None.

***Environmental:*** None.

***Race & Equity:*** If used properly, this system *may* serve to eliminate police officers' implicit biases, especially as they manifest in use of force situations where bias can have fatal consequences. Whether this program is successful in that regard would have be assessed after it had been in operation for some time, as task possibly suited to the new Inspector General once that office is stood up later in 2021.

**ACTION REQUESTED OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

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For questions regarding this report, please contact John Alden, Executive Director, at 510-238-7401.

Respectfully submitted,



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JOHN ALDEN  
Executive Director, CPRA

Attachments: None.