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MDC launches first-ever course to help Miami-Dade officers save their own lives

MIAMI HERALD STAFF

With 14 fatalities last year, Florida currently leads the nation in the number of officers killed on duty, according to national statistics.

Now, a pioneering course developed by Miami Dade College's Medical Campus and Miami-Dade police aims to reduce that number by training local officers to tend to wounded partners, and even themselves, before paramedics arrive.

Tactical Life-Saver course is first of its kind in the country. The training focuses on what officers should do in the first minutes after an officer is shot, which can mean the difference between life and death.

The intense 40-hour course will teach officers necessary medical knowledge to stay alive during the "golden hour" or until help arrives, which can be delayed by circumstances.

"If an officer is wounded and is pinned down by gunfire, the paramedics will not come into a crime scene until the bad guys are captured," said MDC School of Health Sciences Dean Pete Gutierrez, who is a former Miami police officer. "This training is meant to teach officers to keep each other alive in that situation. It's a way to buy them time."

Gutierrez said the impetus for the course, which resembled those given to U.S. Army soldiers, came after the slaying in January 2011 of two Miami-Dade police officers while trying to serve a warrant on a murder suspect in Miami. Fatally wounded were Officers Amanda Haworth and Roger Castillo. A third officer was hit and the suspect was shot to death.

"After that tragic incident, we decided to take a look and see what we could do to help officers better survive such a violent incident," said Gutierrez, who is also the police department's medical training director.

Part of the officers' week-long training will take place at the MDC medical campus' state-of-the-art Simulation Lab, where human simulators will be used to teach wound assessment and bleeding control; stabilize spinal injuries; and treat a sucking chest wound.

Another segment will be taught at the Miami-Dade police training center, where officers will be placed in realistic, dangerous scenarios where they will simulate being wounded on duty.

All officers who take the course will be giving special emergency trauma kits to carry during their shift.

The course is under way this week with 17 officers. It will continue until all county officers have gone through the training.

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