

# Training During a Pandemic: The Federal Probation and Pretrial Academy's Journey Into a Virtual World

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**SINCE ITS INCEPTION** in January 2005, the Federal Probation and Pretrial Academy (FPPA; formerly known as the National Training Academy) has been the training home for U.S. probation and pretrial services officers. In its infancy, the FPPA, located at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in Charleston, South Carolina, provided a three-week basic training program for new officers along with firearms instructor training. Since then, it has developed curricula, resources, and staff to provide a six-week training program to new officers in addition to advanced firearms, safety, and search and seizure training programs. In 2012, the FPPA also assumed the role of facilitating Post-Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA) training and hosting regular iterations of training for the federal system's evidence-based risk-needs-responsivity program for supervision: Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Re-arrest (STARR). Today, the FPPA supports nine training programs provided primarily by the Training and Safety Division of the Probation and Pretrial Services Office: Initial Probation and Pretrial Training (IPPT), Initial Firearms Instructor Certification (IFIC), Firearms Instructor Recertification

(FIR), Initial Safety Instructor Certification (ISIC), Safety Instructor Recertification (SIR), Search and Seizure Training Program (SSTP), Officer Skill Enhancement Training (OFSET), PCRA, and STARR. The FPPA has trained over 13,000 students—approximately 1,200 to 1,300 per year since 2015—across these programs, including nearly 4,500 new officers in IPPT alone.

In November 2018, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Accreditation (FLETA) Board awarded accreditation to the IPPT program. The FLETA Board is the accrediting body for all federal law enforcement training and support programs in the United States. To achieve accreditation, agencies must undergo a rigorous assessment to ensure compliance with FLETA standards and procedures in the following areas: administration, training staff, training development, training delivery, and distance learning. This is a momentous achievement in the history of the FPPA.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to grip the United States in March 2020, the FPPA and the FLETC realized it was simply a matter of time before training would be impacted. The unknown nature of the global health crisis at the time made it difficult to determine the appropriate course of action. Training initially continued as usual, with staff implementing precautionary measures such as

adding more hand sanitizer and disinfecting products to training venues. Shortly thereafter, however, the FPPA decided to indefinitely suspend in-person training, including IPPT classes 2004 and 2005, on March 13, 2020. Students in these classes, who had completed half of the six-week program, were directed to return to their duty stations, and FPPA staff worked swiftly to arrange transportation for students to return to their respective districts. (Students in IPPT classes 2004 and 2005 completed the IPPT program virtually in December 2020. IFIC class 2003 graduated and traveled home on March 13, 2020.) The fiscal year 2020 total reflected in Figure 1 (next page) illustrates the total number of students trained both in person and in the virtual environment.

After suspending training, FPPA staff began working remotely to reduce exposure to COVID-19. In the weeks that followed, the FLETC held several meetings with partner organizations, including the FPPA, to discuss a plan to continue training. The FLETC determined it would enact a 14-day restriction-of-movement (ROM) period for all new students coming onto campus to mitigate the risk of asymptomatic students spreading COVID-19 after arriving at the FLETC. (The ROM period was later reduced to 10 days.) During the ROM period, students could

<sup>1</sup> For questions or further information, contact Training and Safety Division Chief Stephanie Denton at Stephanie\_Denton@ao.uscourts.gov.

attend classes virtually from their individual dormitory rooms, thus eliminating all physical firearms and safety training from the first two weeks and requiring all classroom training to be conducted by FPPA instructors, most of whom had no experience in virtual instruction. Furthermore, for the duration of training, each partner organization was given a specific, staggered time period for its students to enter the campus cafeteria for meals, as opposed to the general open time frames previously used for all students. Students would only be allowed to enter certain FLETC facilities, such as the gyms, at certain times of the day and would not be allowed to leave campus until after graduation, with the exception of emergency situations.

In an effort to reconstitute in-person training, the FPPA created class schedules to accommodate the ROM period and specified meal times. These schedules featured virtual classes for the first two training weeks, followed by four weeks of socially distanced traditional classroom and firearms and safety classes. The FPPA was prepared to resume its previously established fiscal year 2020 training schedule, but ultimately decided against allowing students to return to campus due to the rising number of COVID-19 cases around the country and growing concerns about student and staff health and safety. As the number of new probation and pretrial services officers needing training grew, the FPPA eventually determined it would resume training in a 100 percent virtual environment. Following this virtual model, students would attend, and staff would facilitate, training from their homes or offices through the Microsoft Skype platform, subsequently replaced by Microsoft Teams.

### Initial Response

During the initial response to the pandemic, the FPPA staff had several meetings with district staff to provide guidance on how to continue training during the pandemic. They also took several steps to keep the FPPA staff engaged and active. There were virtual skill enhancement sessions, dry fire challenges, wellness challenges, virtual happy hours, and more.

The FPPA staff treated the time away from campus as an opportunity to update curricula, develop new curricula, conduct research, and complete unfinished projects. The FPPA Information Technology (IT) and program specialists trained the entire staff on Skype and Microsoft Teams, and they began to make

plans for what was appearing to be a much longer work-from-home period than initially anticipated.

### Liaison Program

Once the reality of the pandemic began to set in, FPPA staff reached out to districts to see what they could do to serve them in the best way possible while the FPPA was unable to provide live training. The Firearms and Safety Liaison Program was born out of those conversations. The FPPA assigned staff members to each circuit, and those liaisons were to serve as the point of contact for any firearms, safety, or training-related questions. Though the FPPA has always been responsive to questions from the field, the new circumstances justified a more proactive approach to communication.

The liaison program was announced in a variety of ways, and the FPPA held two virtual training sessions to educate the field on the liaison program and to answer any questions about training operations during the pandemic. In addition to launching the liaison program, these informative sessions introduced a series of documents designed to assist districts as they began to run their own initial firearms and safety trainings.

The FPPA Firearms and Safety Branch staff created three main documents. The first was an overall checklist that could be used as a quick reference guide to make sure officers received training in all the required and recommended areas of firearms and safety. The other two documents provided information about particular methods of instruction in each of the firearms and safety areas, including a recommended order of instruction, drills, and ways to modify the curriculum based upon resources available in the districts.

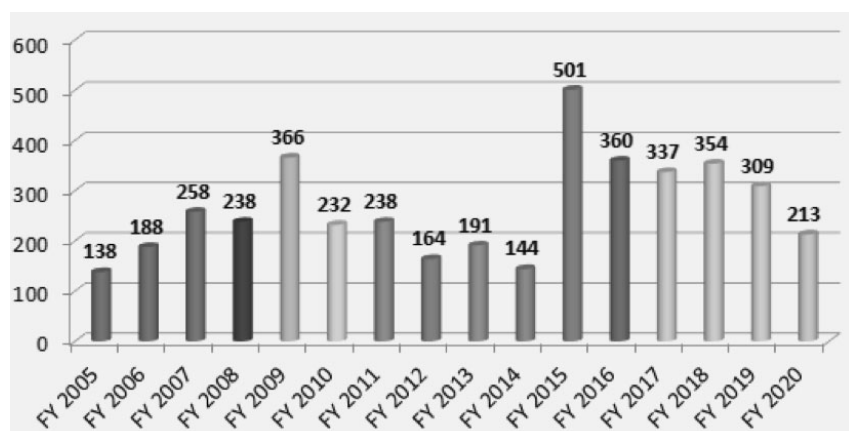
### Contact Safety

Not long after it became clear that the academy might be working from home for an extended period, the FPPA management team started brainstorming ideas to keep staff engaged in the mission. As mentioned previously, one idea was to conduct skill enhancements virtually. The first staff skill enhancement conducted was for the Contact Safety curriculum, which was in the process of being updated after a staff member attended a de-escalation course conducted by Force Science. The new curriculum focused on preparing staff to successfully manage a potential use-of-force incident, and provided information on de-escalation, tactical decision making, situational awareness, mental and physical responses to stress, and considerations following a use-of-force incident.

This skill enhancement was conducted via Skype for the FPPA staff, who determined that the presentation needed improvement. Essentially, they discovered that teaching virtually required a different skillset to get audience participation and engagement. As time passed, the academy liaisons started to receive more and more correspondences from districts inquiring if the academy would be conducting any virtual training. District instructors began indicating that they were starting to have concerns about completing sufficient training hours. The FPPA wanted to help, and it was therefore an easy decision to begin providing districts with virtual training during the pandemic.

Once the decision was made to provide the training, Contact Safety seemed to be the logical choice for the first class. The curriculum was an appropriate length to present virtually, it was recently updated, and the

**FIGURE 1**  
New officers trained by fiscal year, 2005–present



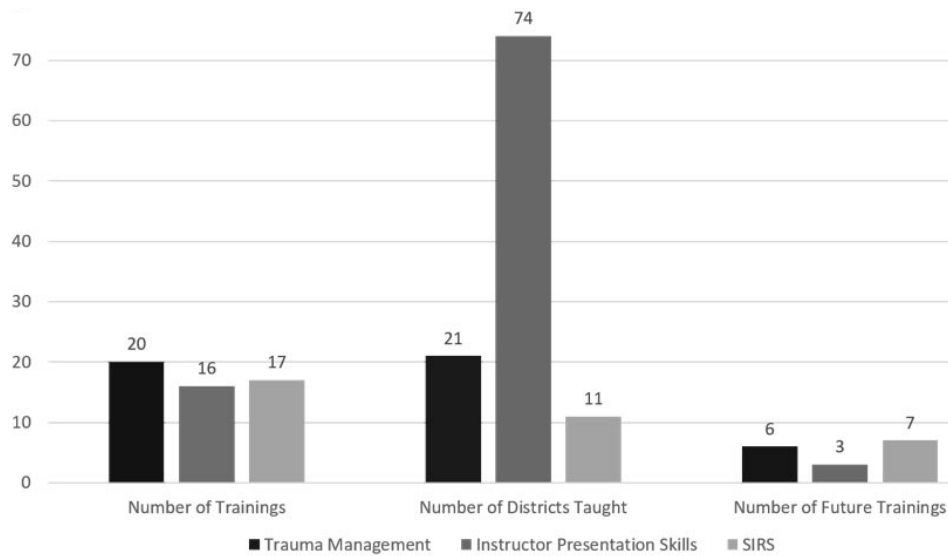
FPPA had already had one attempt at presenting the class via Skype, complete with lessons learned. Staff spent a great deal of time and effort researching components of a successful virtual presentation. They needed to learn how to hold an audience’s attention and drive engagement in a virtual setting. The curriculum was revised with this in mind, and instructors found various ways to drive participation and engagement using the chat bar, online polls, videos and audio files, online quizzes, Microsoft Forms, the Teams “raise hand” feature, and various other methods. The class was advertised to districts through the Probation and Pretrial Services Office chief’s update, emails to the lead firearms and safety instructors in each district, and the FPPA’s

firearms and safety instructor bulletin. On June 10, 2020, the FPPA presented the first iteration of the Contact Safety virtual training. The program has continued to evolve and has become the template for subsequent virtual trainings. The class is now taught through Microsoft Teams, and student engagement is driven through videos, audio recordings, interactive polls, and discussions in the chat bar. At the time of this writing, the FPPA staff has presented the class 45 times, to 58 districts, and has reached 2,679 officers, while receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback. The class has been so successful that there are plans to continue to offer the class to interested districts for the foreseeable future, possibly even beyond the pandemic.

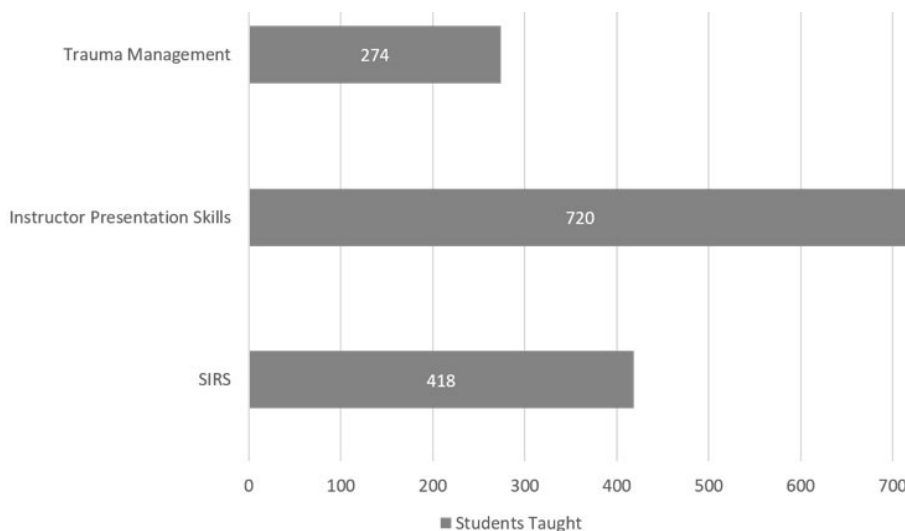
### Other Advanced Programs

As the country continued to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the FPPA liaisons continued to receive correspondence from the field, and the Contact Safety virtual class continued to receive positive reviews, the FPPA started looking into the possibility of offering other trainings to districts. Not long after conducting the first Contact Safety virtual class, there was a request from the field for the academy to provide training on Search and Seizure for Court Unit Executives. FPPA staff then developed a two-hour search and seizure class based on the Legal Principles lesson plan that is taught in the Search and Seizure Training program at the FPPA. The class is similar to Contact Safety in that it is taught via Teams, and instructors attempt to generate student engagement as much as possible. The presentation received positive feedback, and the FPPA decided to attempt to offer this class as a refresher training for the field as needed. The class was advertised in the same manner as Contact Safety, with an additional email being sent to district search and seizure instructors. The class has continued to evolve, and some feedback has indicated that districts may benefit from more information on use of force-related policy along with information on the seizing, storing, and destruction of evidence and contraband seized during searches. With that in mind, the FPPA now holds pre-briefings with districts before conducting this training and attempts to tailor the training to the district’s needs. The FPPA has now provided Search and Seizure, Evidence, and Use of Force-related trainings more than 47 times, covering over 45 districts and reaching over 1,937 students. The success of these classes and further conversations with the districts then led to the development of other virtual trainings offered by the FPPA in Trauma Management, Instructor Skills Refresher (a class offered to certified safety, firearms, and search instructors), and the Safety and Information Reporting System (SIRS). The statistics for these classes can be seen in Figures 2 and 3.

**FIGURE 2**  
FPPA virtual presentations conducted, September 2020–April 2021



**FIGURE 3**  
Officers taught in virtual classes, September 2020–April 2021



### Virtual FIR

One of the unintended consequences of suspending in-person training was that firearms instructors’ certifications nationwide began to expire without their having the opportunity to take the training needed to renew them. The Administrative Office’s Director authorized extensions to firearm certifications in the *Guide to Judiciary Policy*, and subsequently

made temporary modifications to the *PPSO Firearms and Safety Procedures Manual*, which helped alleviate this issue. However, after almost a year of suspended training, it became clear that further action was needed. The team at the FPPA began exploring the possibility of a virtual Firearms Instructor Recertification (VFIR) program.

The question was simple: Could a VFIR be created that would provide value to firearms instructors beyond the recertification itself? A “check the box” class would not meet the mark, and for a VFIR to work it had to do something to improve the instructors in the class. The team got to work. Ideas came together about how the virtual environment could be treated as an asset to the training instead of a hindrance. For the first time ever, instructors were able to use videos to show real-world applications of the techniques discussed. Animations were created to illustrate movement principles inside buildings, images were available to show what an officer could and could not see in a specific moment in time, and interactive activities were able to challenge an officer’s understanding of the principles taught.

The first VFIR was launched on February 1, 2021, and concluded with 15 students graduating on February 5, 2021. FPPA instructors introduced re-certifying instructors not only to new ways of presenting information but also to training on new materials. VFIR 2101 was the pilot class for a Pistol Mounted Optics familiarization course along with a newly revised Tactical Movement lesson plan and the updated Trauma Management lesson plan.

## PCRA and STARR

Since 2012, the FPPA has hosted and facilitated stand-alone PCRA trainings several times per year. The training is offered to officers, including management, and officer assistants who need access to the PCRA tool or are simply interested in learning more about it. Traditionally, the PCRA training is done in two days, with eight hours of instruction per day. However, when the FPPA transitioned to virtual courses, this changed to three training days of four to five hours per day and was offered more often. As of April 19, 2021, 58 students completed the virtual PCRA training.

The FPPA began hosting STARR training in 2012. Although students receive the training at the FPPA, the course is traditionally facilitated by permanent and temporary-duty probation administrators from PPSO’s National Program

Development Division as well as officers qualified as national trainers. During the pandemic, STARR trainers created and facilitated trainings virtually reaching 91 students.

## IPPT

The IPPT program, the FPPA’s flagship course, expanded in January 2006 from three to five weeks, then in January 2007 to six weeks, where it has generally remained. In 2015, the FPPA temporarily reduced the program to four weeks to address a backlog of new officers in need of training. In rare instances, some IPPT iterations have been shortened due to unforeseen circumstances surrounding inclement weather and government shutdowns. In the years leading up to 2020, the FPPA facilitated two simultaneous IPPT classes of 24 students for approximately seven or eight iterations each year, with over 300 officers graduating annually since 2015. The FPPA facilitated all classes face-to-face with students at the FLETC, where officers trained eight hours per day on a variety of topics in a classroom setting, as well as firearms, officer response tactics, and driver training. Students were also required to complete designated electronic learning modules (ELMs) and participate in various scenario-based practical exercises during the program. Although this was not required for graduation, most students achieved Pretrial Risk Assessment (PTRA) and PCRA certifications and met the criteria to carry a firearm as provided in the *Director’s Firearms Regulations* and the *PPSO Firearms and Safety Procedures Manual*.

When the decision to move to 100 percent virtual training was made, the accredited IPPT program was placed on hiatus. Doing so allowed us to provide virtual IPPT training without any negative impact on accreditation. Prior to the pandemic, the IPPT program syllabus consisted of four main components: General Curriculum, Firearms and Safety Training, Driver Training, and ELMs, with three written exams. Students participating in the IPPT program would complete a total of 221 curriculum hours prior to graduation. To develop a virtual program, numerous meetings and discussions were held to determine the best training approach and to finalize a virtual curriculum that would meet the growing needs of new officer training in our system.

The FPPA’s program specialist used her extensive knowledge of designing, developing, delivering, and implementing distance learning to offer best practices and lead the implementation. With a short time allotted

to implementation, FPPA staff leveraged the e-learning practices with which they were already comfortable (Blackboard and webinars) and grew those to expedite implementation.

Curriculum decisions were made on what would remain, be modified, or removed from the virtual program, and two new ELMs were created to replace instructor-led classes, freeing up more time for other topics. These ELMs were delivered on Blackboard with the other ELMs used in IPPT. The FPPA also expanded their Blackboard use to incorporate online exams.

Emphasis was placed on preparing students and instructors for the new virtual environment. Students were provided with checklists and a tutorial on the virtual training platforms, as well as an assignment to meet with an FPPA staff member to demonstrate their ability to connect and participate in a virtual class.

The FPPA program specialist first provided classes to staff on exploring the best practices to be used when training at a distance, how to mitigate technology failures, and how to convert their classroom training to optimize student engagement, collaboration, and communication in a virtual environment. That was followed by training on Skype and Teams, focusing on how to encourage interaction and use the tools available in each program. Next was an in-depth training on the educational technology programs like Microsoft Forms, Poll Everywhere, Blackboard, Adobe Acrobat, and Teams collaboration tools. Instructors adapted their curriculum and put in numerous hours to become proficient at using distance learning technology.

We established a backup plan to continue class in case of technology issues: Instructors and students are instructed to download and keep a backup copy of the digital class materials on their computer and provided with an audio line call-in number for each class session. Additionally, each class is staffed with a “facilitator” who can assist students with technical issues and check on students who are not responding in class. This helps to prevent class disruptions due to an individual student’s technical issues. Staff and students are set up in the FPPA Mobile application so they can use the student roster and staff directory to communicate using cell phones and messaging during technology failures.

The first Virtual IPPT (VIPPT) program began on August 3, 2020, with VIPPT classes 2010 and 2011. With physical and driving training being eliminated from the curriculum—districts assumed the responsibility of

training their own officers in these areas during the pandemic—the program was reduced to approximately three weeks. To accommodate the eight time zones spanning the 94 judicial districts, training was reduced to six hours per day, from 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Eastern Time (ET), with a one-hour break, beginning at 12:30 p.m. ET. As the FPPA was acting independently of the FLETC in providing virtual training, students graduating from VIPPT received only a certificate from the FPPA, not from the Department of Homeland Security. All training, labs, practical exercises, and exams were facilitated by FPPA staff and adjuncts only, with no third-party role players.

While some courses were converted to ELMs for students to complete on their own time before or during the training program, all other classes were converted to a “virtual-friendly” format. This format includes modified or new methods of instruction and class activities (interactive polls, games, surveys, student presentations, etc.) to keep students engaged. The first VIPPT iteration consisted of a total of 97 curriculum hours and two written exams.

Following the first VIPPT, instructors and students provided valuable feedback on their experiences with the virtual program, which helped the FPPA make additional modifications to further enhance the training program. Some classes were given more hours, and additional ELMs were added. The current VIPPT consists of 78 general curriculum hours, 9 Firearms & Safety Training classroom hours, 15 hours of ELMs, and two written exams. Student evaluations remain a fundamental step in the success of the program, and students are asked to provide feedback weekly on each class they attend.

Another change was adding three 2-hour periods of time within the schedule to allow students time to complete ELMs, prepare for classes, complete assignments, and study for their upcoming exams. Some of the feedback received from students was the inability to disconnect from district work obligations while attending VIPPT. By adding the additional blocks of time into the schedule, the hope was to alleviate some of the after-hours work being completed by students and promote a healthy work/life balance.

Instructor training and buy-in was a key element in making the VIPPT program a success. Instructors from both branches (Training & Skills and Firearms & Safety) have spent countless hours learning how to teach in a virtual environment. As of June 2, 2021, 408 students have completed the VIPPT program.

### Looking Forward

The academy has learned many lessons during the pandemic. The virtual trainings would not have been possible without the hard work of the entire staff. The contributions have been significant from everyone at the academy, including the management team, probation administrators, detailed staff, IT staff, and support staff. They have all put in extra hours, shown great flexibility, solved difficult problems, and continued to rise to the occasion time and time again. There have been many challenges associated with conducting training in a virtual format, and they have tried to address these challenges in the best way possible. The entire staff shares the goal of continuing to improve their virtual content.

The FPPA understands that attending virtual training has required the sacrifice of

students and their coworkers and families. They would like to extend their appreciation of the patience, support, and feedback from officers and management teams as they have worked through various obstacles to develop and improve the virtual training programs.

At the start of this process, the FPPA did not foresee all the benefits they would receive from teaching in a virtual setting. They have been able to provide instruction and ongoing education to thousands of officers on varying topics. The staff has become more familiar with and knowledgeable about Skype, Teams, and other technology platforms. The FPPA has had the time and opportunity to update existing curriculum and to develop new curriculum. The academy is hopeful they will be able to continue to implement virtual trainings in some capacity after the pandemic in order to best serve the needs of districts. Like everyone, the academy is hopeful that the reconstitution process will begin sometime soon. As beneficial and far-reaching as virtual training has been, they still believe there is no substitute for in-person training. The goal is to resume in-person training when they can do so safely and effectively.

The FLETC has implemented many safety protocols such as face-covering requirements, health screening before entering the campus, installing plexiglass at numerous locations around campus, and the ROM period for students upon arrival on campus. Additionally, the FPPA have personal protective equipment available for staff and are considering protocols of their own for when they resume in-person training. The FPPA remains dedicated to their mission and to assisting the districts in every way possible, and they strive to continue to provide quality training, virtually for now and in person in the future.