

Looking Back on 20 Years of the Federal Probation and Pretrial Academy¹

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THE FEDERAL PROBATION and Pretrial Academy (FPPA) began training U.S. probation and pretrial services officers in January 2005, when it assumed responsibility of new officer training from the Federal Judicial Center and centralized national firearms training. In the 20 years since then, the academy has grown from 12 staff and 3 training programs to nearly 40 staff and 10 training programs. Thousands of new and experienced probation and pretrial services officers from all 94 federal judicial districts are trained annually at the FPPA in various aspects of the job. The Probation and Pretrial Services Office's (PPSO) Training and Safety Division, which operates the FPPA, is also responsible for oversight of the federal probation and pretrial services system's firearms and safety policies and procedures and districts' adherence to them.

Originally operating as the National Training Academy, the academy was rechristened the Federal Probation and Pretrial Academy in 2016 to more accurately reflect its mission (*News and Views*, 2017). Under the umbrella of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, the FPPA was one of 27 partner organizations to send students to training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center

(FLETC) in Charleston, South Carolina, in fiscal year (FY) 2025. Of those organizations, the FPPA was one of 15 to have agency-specific, residential training programs on the Charleston campus.² The U.S. probation and pretrial services system's annual student throughput ranked among the highest of all partner organizations at FLETC-Charleston in fiscal year 2025 (Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, personal communication, August 18, 2025).

The collection of training programs offered at the FPPA has significantly expanded in the last 20 years. In addition to training for new officers and firearms instructors, the FPPA now offers programs for safety instructor certifications, search and seizure, firearms skill enhancement, supervision risk assessment, core correctional practices, and sex offense supervision. (Figure 1 shows the number of officers trained in each of the FPPA's 10 established programs.) The academy frequently provides training materials to districts seeking guidance in officer safety, firearms, and courtroom testimony. Twelve times since 2022, the FPPA has offered export tactical trainings at different field locations around the country.

The FPPA's total student throughput, including virtual training, has now exceeded 20,000, including approximately 1,500 in fiscal year 2025.

FPPA instructional staff consist of current probation and pretrial services officers on three-year detail assignments to the FPPA and FLETC and former officers now serving as PPSO probation administrators. Staff from the U.S. Sentencing Commission and qualified officers are frequently invited from the field to serve as adjunct instructors to supplement the FPPA staff, and FLETC staff teach some portions of the Initial Probation and Pretrial Training (IPPT) program. All full-time instructors must successfully complete an approved law enforcement instructor program. In addition to the academy director and branch chiefs overseeing the Training and Skills Branch and Firearms and Safety Branch, non-instructional FPPA staff include an accreditation manager, policy analyst, instructional technology specialist, budget analyst, program assistants, and national wellness coordinator. In addition to supporting the FPPA, the staff also serve the field in various other capacities, including leading or participating on national working groups, advisory committees, district reviews, and accreditation assessment teams.

Initial Probation and Pretrial Training

As the FPPA's flagship program, IPPT began

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² In fiscal year 2025, 27 organizations with signed memoranda of understanding with FLETC sent students to the Charleston campus for training. This number does not include state and local agencies or Offices of Inspector General (Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, personal communication, August 18, 2025).

with the opening of the FPPA in 2005 and has since served as basic training for over 6,000 new U.S. probation and pretrial services officers. Its curriculum, format, and length have transformed across two decades based on research, needs of the field, and new initiatives. Through a blended approach of lecture, laboratory exercises, written and practical exams, and electronic learning modules (ELM), new officers obtain and are assessed on the fundamental knowledge and skills related to their jobs. Officers in the IPPT program learn policies, procedures, and approaches related to investigations, supervision, firearms, and officer response tactics. Scenario-based training in the program allows officers to perform skills related to:

- interviewing,
- core correctional practices,
- home inspections,
- plain view seizures,
- supervision strategies,
- pretrial and presentence investigations,
- risk assessments,
- treatment services,
- officer response tactics,
- use of force,
- tactical pistol applications,
- oleoresin capsicum exposure,
- trauma management, and
- vehicle operations.

The program also includes a reentry simulation and a testifying skills exercise, during which students testify on prepared fictitious cases, with invited district management staff playing the roles of judge, prosecutor, and defense counsel.

Throughout each IPPT class, students interact with trained role players acting as gang and extremist group members, persons charged with or convicted of sex offenses, domestic violence perpetrators, individuals with mental health or substance use issues, treatment providers, and disorderly third parties, among others. The program's curriculum has grown to include classes on officer wellness, overcoming stress, effective communication and interviewing, violent extremism, effective writing, trauma management, de-escalation, and more. In January 2025, following extensive research and testing of pistol mounted optics (PMO)—which led to their authorization for field use by PPSO—the FPPA began permitting students to use PMOs during IPPT training. Since then, the academy has seen a steady increase in their use among program participants.

When it began, IPPT was a three-week

course focused largely on firearms and safety (Ward & McGrath, 2015). A year later the program expanded to five weeks and added core discipline curricula (pretrial investigations and supervision, presentence investigations, and post-conviction supervision) and various other lecture- and scenario-based classes. In January 2007, the program expanded to six weeks, at which length it has generally remained. In response to a significant backlog of new officers in need of training, in 2015 the FPPA temporarily shortened the IPPT program to four weeks and trained 501 officers, which still stands as the largest annual throughput in the program. (The annual totals for IPPT graduates are reflected in Figure 2.) From January 2016 to 2020, IPPT resumed its six-week schedule.

Another training backlog followed the COVID-19 pandemic, likely due to officers who had waited to attend IPPT until the return of face-to-face training. In response, in January 2023 the FPPA shortened the program from six to four weeks to allow for more classes. The four-week program continued until the backlog was eliminated in October 2024, at which point the program expanded to five weeks. It is scheduled to return to its usual six-week model in fiscal year 2026. During the shortened program, several blocks of instruction were not offered, including FLETC's driving laboratory exercises. Other blocks were shortened. However, students still received the training to complete the requirements for the initial firearms program and other certifications, such as the Pretrial Risk Assessment and Post-Conviction Risk Assessment tools.

COVID-19 and the Transition to Virtual Training

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the FPPA to suspend all in-person training beginning in March 2020. The academy initially awaited the possibility of resuming in-person training, but as COVID-19 cases continued to rise, it became clear that face-to-face instruction would remain suspended for the foreseeable future. Districts continued to reach out to the FPPA for guidance and training within appropriate social distancing parameters. As a result, FPPA staff researched and learned new methods and technology for delivering training and engaging officers virtually with programs that had scarcely been used at the academy before then.

After a brief pause in training, the FPPA facilitated its first virtual training on June 10,

2020, when it taught Contact Safety to dozens of officers around the country (Denton et al., 2015). This course, which was ultimately presented 51 times to 2,947 officers across 60 districts during the pandemic, covered topics such as de-escalation, use-of-force incidents, and emotional and physiological responses to stress. Virtual versions of Contact Safety and search and seizure trainings were the forerunners for the catalog of virtual courses eventually offered by the FPPA.

The FPPA introduced a three-week virtual IPPT program in August 2020. The virtual alternative to in-person instruction enabled the academy to continue delivering training to meet the needs of new officers. During the period of virtual training, districts were responsible for the initial firearms and safety training for their new officers, while the FPPA focused on classes related to investigations and supervision. FPPA staff modified lesson plans and presentations to adjust to the virtual setting, and class activities and interviewing scenarios were modified so students could interact virtually with others. Two of the traditional program's courses were converted to ELMs to maximize time for live presentations.

This initial version of the virtual IPPT program, during which students attended class for six hours per day to best accommodate the various time zones used across the judicial districts, included 97 curriculum hours over 15 days. (Immediately prior to the pandemic, the program was 221 hours.) The virtual program eventually expanded to 17 training days. Twenty-seven virtual IPPT classes graduated between August 2020 and February 2022, with the final virtual class being offered after the reinstatement of in-person classes to accommodate students who were uncomfortable or unable to attend face-to-face training due to COVID-related restrictions.

Building on its suite of virtual offerings, the FPPA also introduced its Presentation Skills Refresher class during the pandemic. This course was developed in response to requests from field instructors tasked with delivering initial firearms and safety training to new officers while the academy's in-person classes were on hold. The class, which focused on effective instructional techniques and training aids for firearms and safety training, was offered 16 times to 720 students from 74 districts between September 2020 and April 2021.

As the pandemic continued, certifications for many firearms instructors began to lapse in the absence of available face-to-face

training. Because of this, the FPPA created a virtual version of its Firearms Instructor Recertification (FIR) course to satisfy the certification requirements, allowing instructors to continue training officers in their districts. The five-day course, which required students to shoot an instructor-level qualifying score in their districts before attending, featured instructional videos and animations to demonstrate movement principles and shooter perspectives, as well as interactive exercises for comprehension of effective instructional techniques. Between February and September 2021, the FPPA presented nine iterations of the virtual FIR course, recertifying nearly 200 instructors.

FPPA staff also presented virtual courses on Post Conviction Risk Assessment, search and seizure for chiefs and deputy chiefs, trauma management, and Safety and Information Reporting System use. Additionally, they created a liaison program that identified specific FPPA points of contact for each circuit for training-related questions. While most virtual trainings ceased upon the return to in-person training, the FPPA still offers its virtual de-escalation course, which was created in January 2024 and to date has been offered eight times to over 2,000 probation and pretrial services staff.

Return to In-person Training

Due to ongoing pandemic concerns and strict FLETC policies regarding student movement restrictions on campus, all FPPA training programs remained exclusively virtual through September 2021. With the focus on student and staff health and safety, FPPA management spent the summer of 2021 evaluating the ever-changing COVID-19 situation and discussing the best way forward with training. This included discussions throughout PPSO and with FLETC leadership, stakeholders in the field, FLETC's medical director, and the AO's epidemiologist, among others. Finally, in October 2021, in-person training resumed at the FPPA with a Safety Instructor Recertification class. In November 2021, IPPT returned to its six-week, in-person format.

From that point until April 2024, FLETC implemented various health and safety protocols related to COVID-19. The protocols changed frequently and included student location restrictions, proof of COVID vaccinations or a negative COVID test before training, weekly COVID testing, dorm isolation for students who tested positive or were exposed to COVID, delivery of meals by

staff to isolated students, and face coverings. During this period, numerous students and staff were isolated after testing positive for COVID, causing many dismissals from the IPPT program for excessive training absences. (Students who could not complete the program for this reason were welcome to return with a different class.)

IPPT Reclassification

In April 2022, FLETC reclassified IPPT from a Center Integrated Basic (CIB) program to an Agency Specific Basic (ASB) program. The change was prompted by FLETC's enforcement of classification standards, which require that FLETC provide at least 50 percent of the instruction in a CIB program. At the time, the FPPA and adjunct staff taught the majority of the IPPT curriculum, while FLETC covered the rest. In the FPPA's experience, ASB courses had been given lower scheduling priority by FLETC compared to CIB and Center Basic programs, which are primarily facilitated by FLETC instructors. FPPA/PPSO management and the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Chiefs Advisory Group (CAG) discussed the implications of relinquishing more of the IPPT training to non-U.S. Courts instructors and ultimately determined the FPPA would not seek to retain CIB status for IPPT. The decision was driven largely by the desire to keep the training for new officers internal—that is, taught by FPPA staff with probation and pretrial services experience—due to the unique nature of the system's mission relative to traditional law enforcement agencies.

The reclassification meant that FLETC would only be involved with the IPPT program to the extent needed by the FPPA. As an ASB program, the FPPA made significant changes to its policy and procedures to reflect less reliance on FLETC's services. Among other duties, the FPPA assumed responsibility for:

- developing, approving, securing, administering, and analyzing written exams and practical exercises;
- collecting and analyzing long-term feedback from students and their supervisors;
- identifying instructional and program deficiencies based on student performance;
- validating learning objectives;
- organizing comprehensive curriculum reviews;
- developing and facilitating remedial processes;
- maintaining student performance records; and
- creating and presenting student awards.

The combination of IPPT's reclassification and an influx of training from other agencies at the FLETC-Charleston campus has created challenges related to priority for training venues. However, the FPPA has adjusted to having more autonomy in facilitating the IPPT program. FLETC continues to provide services such as lodging, role players, meals, equipment, medical treatment, uniforms, and some student transportation. Further, FLETC staff teach basic handgun instruction, driver training, and illicit drug courses in the IPPT program, as requested and partially funded by the FPPA.

Accreditation

Behind the scenes of training, the FPPA has pursued other initiatives, including accreditation and firearms and safety office reviews. One of the most noteworthy accomplishments of the FPPA has been its accreditation with the Federal Law Enforcement Training Accreditation (FLETA) Board, the independent accrediting organization for federal law enforcement training and support programs. The accreditation standards were developed by federal law enforcement professionals and are updated periodically by the FLETA Board based on input from its Standards Steering Committee. The program or academy seeking accreditation must show compliance with the FLETA standards, which encompass the following areas:

- administration, including whether the agency offers ethics training as part of its curriculum for basic programs, follows safety and security guidelines, provides technical assistance, determines training needs, maintains program and student records, suspends training due to hazardous conditions, and adheres to its policies on student misconduct and medical clearance for physical training;
- instructor staff, including the training, development, guidance, and supervision of instructors;
- training development, including justification for and evaluation covering each training objective, review and approval of training materials, estimation of program costs, periodic curriculum review, and review of student and supervisor feedback; and
- training delivery, including student orientations, remediation and reevaluation procedures, role players, and adherence to training materials (Federal Law Enforcement Training Accreditation, n.d.).

To become accredited, an agency voluntarily submits to a thorough review of its training program(s) or academy, or both, by a team of trained assessors from the federal law enforcement community. The assessors review documentation, meet with staff, and tour the training facilities during the review. The assessor team then submits a comprehensive report to the FLETA Board. During the next semi-annual FLETA Board Review Committee meeting, the agency gives a presentation and responds to questions from the Board, which makes the final decision regarding accreditation. To maintain accreditation, the program or academy must undergo the same process every five years, submitting progress reports annually.

For many years, FPPA management crafted policies and practices that would eventually put the academy in a position to seek accreditation. In 2017, the FPPA applied for accreditation for its IPPT program and began the extensive process of assessing the program to determine any shortcomings related to FLETA standards. Led by the FPPA accreditation manager, FPPA staff drafted policies, created standardized forms, and implemented processes to promote consistency and compliance with the FLETA program standards.

Following an August 2018 review of the IPPT program by a team of FLETA assessors, the FLETA Board awarded program accreditation to IPPT in November 2018. The first reaccreditation cycle included the transitions between in-person and virtual training, the change in IPPT duration, and IPPT's reclassification from a FLETC CIB program to an ASB program. Despite grappling with these significant changes, the academy was able to make appropriate adjustments to its policies and procedures to maintain its compliance with FLETA standards. In November 2023, the program was reaccredited.

Shortly after IPPT's reaccreditation, the FPPA set its sights on academy accreditation. To achieve this distinction, an agency's basic training programs (such as IPPT) must be accredited, and all other programs offered at the academy must meet the prescribed standards. After a year of preparation, the FPPA met all standards during its official assessment in March 2025 and was awarded academy accreditation in May 2025. With the award, the FPPA became only the 16th FLETA-accredited law enforcement academy in the country, joining a list that includes training academies for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Secret Service, Naval Criminal Investigative Service, and U.S. Marshals Service.

Through its accreditation status, the FPPA has shown that its training programs are conducted consistently, methodically, and proficiently and that staff are using best practices and the highest standards in training U.S. probation and pretrial services officers. The FPPA has undergone its initial assessments for the Initial Safety Instructor Certification and Initial Firearms Instructor Certification programs and anticipates being awarded accreditation for those programs in November 2025.

New Process for Firearms and Safety Reviews

Historically, firearms and safety reviews were components of the all-encompassing, cyclical reviews of the probation and pretrial services offices throughout the country, during which instructors reviewed the districts' training records, firearms inventory, and other areas. In redesigning the cyclical office reviews, PPSO sought to separate the firearms and safety review from the larger operational review and emphasize training observation and feedback to help districts reach their training goals. In 2024 and 2025, FPPA staff successfully completed pilot firearms and safety reviews in six districts. In response to the overwhelmingly positive feedback received for the pilot reviews, and after consulting with the CAG, PPSO decided to officially establish firearms and safety reviews as separate from the larger operational district reviews.

The change, which officially began in August 2025, shifts the focus from behind-the-scenes to hands-on. Expanding on their previous role of reviewing documentation, reviewers now also observe live training, provide feedback, evaluate districts' firearms and safety training needs, and assist instructors in developing and maintaining strategic training goals. Reviewers provide insight and feedback on training preparation and venues, safety precautions and gear, efficiency and frequency, modalities, use of FPPA lesson plans, presentation skills, succession planning, continuing education, remedial training, and certification status of instructors. Individual districts decide which type of training—firearms, officer response tactics, and/or search and seizure—will be observed. The documentation review is conducted virtually prior to the on-site visit, saving time for observation, feedback, and discussion when reviewers visit the district.

The new firearms and safety review model is mutually beneficial to the districts and the

FPPA, since they can schedule the reviews around the district's established training plans and the FPPA's national training schedule, securing ideal times for both. The separation of the firearms and safety review from the operational review also allows districts and their officers to focus more on each review. This gives some reprieve to officers who are involved in multiple program areas, such as location monitoring and firearms. Ultimately, the new model lets districts showcase their firearms and safety programs and receive feedback from national trainers while allowing the FPPA to gain insight into districts' training, gather ideas from district instructors, and identify potential gaps in national training.

Looking Ahead

Twenty years after its opening, the FPPA remains a critical piece of the development and training of new and experienced federal probation and pretrial services officers. A growing number of partner organizations and training programs at FLETC and uncertain budget allotments will continue to create challenges related to training resources and staffing for the FPPA, but the future of training development appears promising.

Artificial intelligence (AI) presents vast opportunities to enhance training across various domains. The FPPA anticipates integrating AI into virtual and augmented reality platforms for scenario-based training focused on safety, relationship-building, courtroom testimony, and more. AI may also allow more individualized instruction and intelligent tutoring in areas such as:

- report writing,
- policy comprehension,
- interviewing techniques,
- de-escalation tactics,
- verbal and non-verbal communication skills,
- bias recognition,
- rapport building,
- tactical responses,
- firearms proficiency, and
- use-of-force decision-making.

Additionally, advancements in biometric and video analytics will help further optimize officer performance in both training environments and the field.

As technology evolves, so does the complexity of criminal conduct committed by those under investigation or supervision. As a result, the caseloads managed by today's officers differ significantly from those seen

when the federal probation system was established over a century ago. As it has for the past 20 years, the FPPA remains committed to adapting its training to meet these emerging challenges and will continue to develop and modify its training curricula as needed to fulfil the needs of the system.

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FIGURE 1
Officers trained by program, 2005 – present

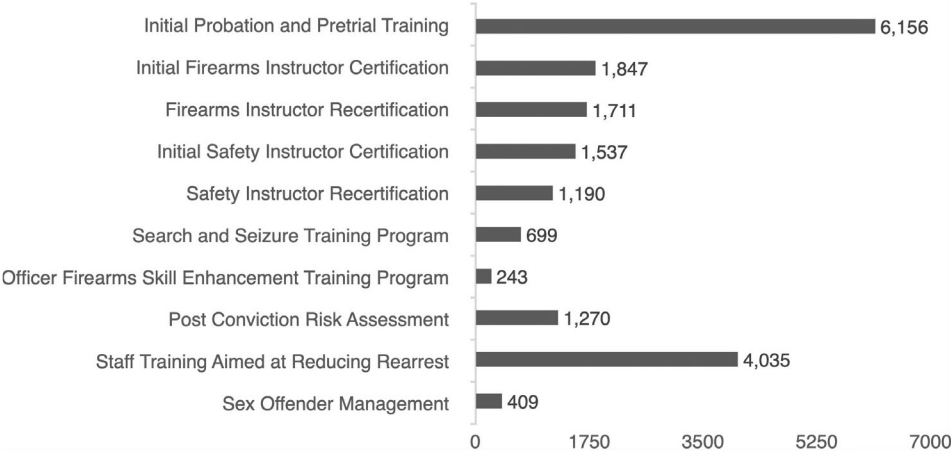


FIGURE 2
IPPT graduates by fiscal year, 2005 – present

