

Introduction

Kirsten: Before the podcast begins, please note that this episode's topic includes conversations about active assailant situations, including individuals with firearms on school campuses, as well as details about tactical training that prepares members of law enforcement for these situations. Due to this, some content may be triggering for listeners.

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Kirsten: You're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast that dives into the stories of the people, programs and resources within the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Each episode, we'll give you the scoop from department personnel on how NCDPS enhances the safety of the people of North Carolina.

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Season 2 Episode 6

Kirsten: What resources do educators and school support staff need to effectively carry out their roles safely and effectively? Do these needs change during times of crisis? How can school staff prepare to respond to an emergency on campus? These are just a few of the questions that the Center for Safer Schools and DPS's Samarcand Training Academy are building training for through their newly formed alliance. In Jackson Springs, tucked away on 430 acres of land surrounded by pine trees, sits Samarcand Training Academy. Originally opened in 1914 as a boys open air school, the campus was repurposed in 2013 when the General Assembly allocated funding to convert the former school into a public safety training center.

Samarcand Training Academy provides basic, in-service and advanced training for DPS law enforcement agencies as well as probation parole officers and juvenile justice employees. Other local, state and federal agencies may conduct training at the facility as needed. Samarcand offers classrooms and dormitory space to house students and instructors, a newly constructed dining hall, a firearms training center with two ranges and a TAC house. The campus also includes a state-of-the-art use of force training simulator and obstacle and conditioning course.

In January 2023, Samarcand welcomed the Center for Safer Schools into a newly renovated academic building that will serve as a temporary facility for on-site crisis prevention training. The space includes two classrooms and two offices with seven adjacent cubicles. I sat down with the academy's director, Matthew Rebeck, to learn more about this partnership and what the future looks like for both Samarcand Training Academy and the Center for Safer Schools.

Take us through your career in law enforcement and what led you to your role with DPS as Director of Samarcand Training Academy.

Dir. Matthew Rebeck: I'll be personal about that. In 1988, I enlisted in the Air Force. I was a security police for the Air Force for about 5 years in Montana, Greece and Germany. I met my wife in the Air Force, and she needed to finish her enlistment, so I was a campus police officer for about 15 months at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. We both did not want to live on the west coast. We are from the east coast, so we traveled back to the tidewater area in Virginia, and I was picked up by the Portsmouth, Virginia police department. So, I worked there for about 7 and 1/2 years and applied for the FBI and was selected in 2002. I spent 14 years in Baltimore and six at the academy in Quantico which is where I just recently retired out of. And I—I'm most proud of five-ish years with the FBI National Academy, thousands of the finest police commanders from around the globe and just being able to share classrooms and other platforms with them and learn.

So, what got me here is a connection through the FBI National Academy. In April of '21, I was diagnosed with blood cancer, and honestly that changed me or to open up to the possibility of a non-sworn position. I'm not ready to completely retire, so this was something that really seemed to fit in a lot of different ways, and the area fit for each of my family members. And I find myself here enjoying the challenge, and so far, it's been very fulfilling.

Kirsten: That's amazing. I'm glad to have you here, and again, thank you for joining us on the podcast. What interested you in a role where you supervise or provide training for law enforcement and other public safety professionals?

Dir. Rebeck: My passion is leadership, and my duty is police community relations. I would say that back at the academy in Quantico quite a bit. So, to come down here and because of my connections down here, I was able to learn some about my duties here. I wasn't able to learn everything. There's some nuances about North Carolina that I didn't completely understand until I got here, but I knew that the vision from the secretary and the vision from legislation and the state was to grow the academy, and that appealed to me very much.

Kirsten: Why did you want to become Director of Samarcand, and what does being in this leadership role mean to you?

Dir. Rebeck: Specifically, it would have been the—the ability to grow. I've got a great passion for serving and positively affecting the law enforcement profession. And I believe in the last couple of years, the leadership in the profession is realizing the importance of training. And so, all those things were in my mind that I can still make a difference, and so far, it hasn't disappointed. The founding director built a great foundation. I was really pleased. I've got a staff of 30, and then we—we should by the summer of '23 have a staff of 54, and who knows what the future holds. We're in the process of a master plan and, uh, for the next two to ten years, and these are, you know, just really exciting for me, to be able to collaborate with other people, bring a shared vision together.

Kirsten: Speaking of making a difference, some changes have happened at Samarcand with different trainings that are offered connected to the Center for Safer Schools. How is Samarcand Training Academy linked to the Center for Safer Schools?

Dir. Rebeck: Very simply, it's the home, the geographic home, of the training component. And my mission works in conjunction with our Executive Director of Center for Safer Schools under DPI, and that's Karen Fairley, in collaboration with the Justice Academy Director, Trevor Allen. And the three of us with... There's a lot of collaborators with this initiative. My first meeting with Secretary Buffaloe, he said, "This is your number one priority," and as I look across everything in the state that's happening, I can see that school safety is indeed the number one priority of the state of North Carolina. And again, it's just an honor to be a—part of this initiative.

So, what we are is we have a 113-acre satellite campus that the Department of Public Safety purchased in early '22, and we're in the process of renovating it. So, we have been using it for months, and we will continue to use it in its current state to the best of our ability, but we don't have office space on it until some of the renovations come through. In the interim, one of my deputy directors, we're sitting around the table brainstorming in late '22, and he said, "Why don't we use the academic B building and just go ahead and start Center for Safer Schools at a smaller scale to give us the opportunity to grow at a slower pace and just possibly be more deliberate and intentional." So, I socialized that with Karen Fairley, and she was ecstatic. And then with Trevor Allen, and so we have a building with two classrooms. It also has two offices for supervisors (one would be DPI and one would be DPS), and then we have seven cubicles in there that just allows us to start, effective this past January, with the training initiative. And we hope to put on some multi-discipline classes as '23 unfolds in front of us here.

Kirsten: The satellite campus that Director Rebeck refers to is a former school campus on 113 acres of land in Montgomery County that's around six miles away from the main training academy. Renovations to this facility to get it to the level needed to hold all styles of training for the Center for Safer Schools are estimated to be completed in 2024.

And so, what kind of training does Samarcand provide to help with the Center for Safer Schools's mission?

Dir. Rebeck: Trevor and I together will spearhead the law enforcement side of it, and Karen conversely will be the education side. And we know that the third discipline is mental health, and we're still working that one out. We are including mental health in our collaboration to the best of our ability, and that's a part of it that needs to grow. So, mental health first aid is one that Karen and DPI will bring to the table. On our side, we look at threat assessment, threat behavior. North Carolina with SBI and then a task force under that. BETA is the acronym, Behavioral Threat Assessment. They have nine BETA agents, and then I don't

know how many task force agents they have that are from local police departments that have gone to the training. Just like many, many task force. So, there is a BETA task force.

So, there's some training along that category, and then a lot of active assailant, active shooter, active killer response, solo response. A lot of that will be spearheaded by, you know, Trevor and I. As well as anything, you know, the—the role of the school resource officer is something to be discussed and continue to train. And I love Karen Fairley. Her mission statement to me informally is so simple. "I want to keep my babies safe," is what she said. So, to take that informal statement, that's really how the three of us feel, and our goal is to look at the multi-discipline school safety model that is prevalent in the nation now, integrate from curriculum design to be integrated across those three professions, and then to train where appropriate across those three professions and then to exercise where appropriate across the three professions. And even into, like, the parenting role and reintegration after, you know, a tragic incident. Those are some of the things that are—are part of our vision.

And I do think we all want to be cutting edge in the nation before, you know, hopefully we'll never say, "All right, we've arrived," but that's—that's our vision at this point. And we are in the infancy of it, but we want to slowly grow, and then we'll move out into that large campus on the satellite, you know, it's six or seven miles away from the main campus, and we'll have a lot more office space. It's a lot more classrooms, a lot more practical scenario platforms to include a football field, baseball field, running track, softball field, large auditorium. There's a principle's residence there that will serve great purpose for, you know, the investigation after a great, you know, exercise incident where investigators can actually execute a search warrant maybe an arrest warrant, and again, take an incident from the threat all the way to the arrest and really look at all aspects of it. We want to train as close to reality as we possibly can, and—and that's why the emphasis in the capital side is, you know, to build as many possible platforms, if you will. Like, we're going to build a staircase. Our campus is one floor right now, but we're going to build an open staircase at one end of the gym and a closed staircase and then a catwalk at the top. That way officers can come and actually train as what probably would be in most schools across North Carolina.

We want to follow through with that to the best of our ability, and hopefully in several years we'll be able to take one wing and start bringing in some of the state-of-the-art physical security mechanisms whether it's bulletproof glass at the school office so to speak, camera systems, really examining what response... You know, we have this traditional thing called a lockdown, and then just to continue to examine whether that is the best option or if there's some physical security aspects that can be brought in involving the doors and maybe thin windows and walls and things of that nature. We would like to eventually get into that.

Kirsten: And so, you've spoken about preparedness and learning how to respond to these different incidents even if those incidents ideally never happen. Why is this kind of training so important?

Dir. Rebeck: Because human life is at stake. And beyond that, it's our children, and you know, that's where Karen is so precious to set that standard as the Executive Director that there is nothing that should be spared in an effort to protect. And you know, this is personal for me. My daughter is a second-grade teacher and has been for seven years, and I really, I want her to have a chance if—if evil were to come to her school.

Kirsten: On top of training offered at Samarqand as part of the Task Force for Safer Schools initiative, DPS also provides school safety checks across the state for K-12 schools and community colleges. In 2022, the department conducted around 110,000 checks. In a memo to the department's law enforcement division heads, Secretary Eddie Buffalo Jr. directed the North Carolina State Highway Patrol, State Capitol Police and Alcohol Law Enforcement divisions to continue these school security checks until the end of the 2023 school year. With DPS's involvement alongside several other agencies in the state's efforts to address school safety, I asked Director Rebeck who in the public safety realm would be involved in upcoming and future trainings at Samarqand.

Dir. Rebeck: We're growing that. So, again, I go back to the three law enforcement, and let me start with law enforcement because that's—that's my lane, so to speak. From analyzing the threat, so in the early stages, it would be these threat assessors and the SROs. The SROs are the liaison between education and law enforcement. And there's good thought to the notion of really establishing the role of an SRO and discussing this back at Quantico has brought to me a spectrum of what the role of the SRO is that needs to be worked out. And so, to—to establish the role of school resource officer in very clear terms and then to train to that across all the professions puts us all on the same page. That's the law enforcement side with the early threat assessors and school resource officers.

Also, training anyone in law enforcement, Patrol specifically, because they're usually one of them is close to the school, but it's not only that. A supervisor could hear it go out on the radio. Another agency could hear the call go out on the radio. You know, the—the goal is always stop the killing, stop the shooting. Whatever it takes. And with that said, to train that response and to have not perfection but at least some common tactics, if you will, and that gets into a pretty complex area, but to know enough that, “hey, you, me, let's go.” And then once that's done, we envision anything that might take place. We want to train towards it, you know, to include the follow-up investigation, building the timeline, any forensic analysis that occurs to—to look at how it happened and how it built, the lengthy after action that's done to learn how it could have been prevented. We want to be a part of that.

And again, across all three professions, and so, getting over a little bit, and I'm a little out of my lane for sure in talking about what the educators are going to be trained about, but first of all they need to be trained on what law enforcement will do and to be in concert and not conflict with that. And then the mental health folks are critical at the threat assessment stage, you know, that any type of intervention let's get to the bottom of why we're getting this edgy behavior, if you will, and—and to intervene before it gets far enough that a violent act occurs.

And—and the resources that the educators have to recognize threat behavior. We've talked about a matrix, you know, these are all just things that are on the research and development table or the drawing board and, you know, there's a lot of other places that are doing great research. And it is a collaborative effort. I do want to emphasize that. So, any training that serves that purpose, you know, we certainly would hope to—to get an effect, and—and then we got to figure out which classes or courses that we want all three professions in together to get towards experiential training where there are activities and roles that are...you're getting muscle repetition. And so, when a crisis occurs, we want to have as much—as many muscle reps as possible for as many responders as possible whichever profession they come from. And that—that is where training is so crucial.

Kirsten:

How will the satellite campus in Biscoe enhance the training?

Dir. Rebeck:

Again it's—it's—it's that highest level of training. So, we have a TAC house, and so we could do scenarios in the TAC house, but it's set up like a residence. It's not hallways with lockers and classrooms and different types of tables and chairs versus the desk-chair combo; a gym, a locker room, a field. So, to—to find the atmosphere that is appropriate for our mission and to duplicate it as best we can and then bring the students in to train. That way their—their muscle memory... They're comfortable. I don't want to go all the way to that level, but they're more comfortable because of having conducted simunition style training in a high school. If they ever unfortunately have to find themselves at a real-world incident, we believe from our—our training philosophy that that is the best training that we can possibly do to replicate in advance what might occur in the future that we want to stop. We're just starting with this training component, and I'm looking forward to seeing what we look like six months, a year down the road and what we've learned and what adjustments we can make. There is no more noble mission than protecting the children of the United States.

Kirsten:

I wanted to wrap up this episode by getting Director Rebeck's opinion on the state of Samarcand Training Academy and hear what is to come in the next few years.

Take us through any updates to Samarcand Training Academy since you started as director in May of '22.

Dir. Rebuck:

Well, I mean, I can't answer that without stressing the foundation that was built by the founding director and handed to me, and the staff that is there. We've got six really great teams, and then two deputy directors that are incredible. Above each of them covers three teams, so we have, you know, the training team which is primarily right now the firearms ranges and the tactical—the TAC house at the school and things of that nature. We have a security team. We have a maintenance team that's just incredible. There's a lot of equipment. They could do a lot of things. And then we have an admin team, customer relations team (the face of the academy) and then lastly housekeeping.

Probably the biggest thing that I did was it was a pedestrian campus, and there's good reason for that, but there are some areas that we can look at to steer vehicle traffic where we can also isolate some pedestrian traffic. You know, that's a growing thing right now, and as we get to where if—if—if we have, you know, over 100 students pretty much every week, you know, we'll just look at what's occurring and make adjustments. But there are several new parking areas (when I say “new,” I mean they're just very well refurbished by this great maintenance team) that veteran students and instructors can drive into the campus, you know, people attending the graduation in the academic building. We have a 320-person auditorium in there. So, we can—we can get some parking closer to that as opposed to parking and walking. So, again, that's growing. But you know, I think it was the right thing to do, and I've gotten great feedback, and so that's working out well.

Some of the other things I've done... Let me just talk about partnerships. I'm really working hard on my partnerships with the Justice Academy, and that is really reaping some great things, and they're doing training on our academy. We have extended the—the option of our instructors traveling to their academy to assist with training as needed, and I think that serves the students, the law enforcement profession in North Carolina the best. We're partnering with Wildlife. They're going to build a multi-million dollar, three story building on campus. And we're also, you know, the Center for Safer Schools partnerships which I've already gone into, again, with DPI, Justice Academy. We have training partnerships, again, with ALE, SBI, Capitol Police. Department of Insurance: Criminal Investigations has been down for leadership training. They've done a leadership retreat, so that's some of the role they're playing in the last nine months.

I brought in some outside training, and for me that was the RAK Academy which is an initiative that fits the Center for Safer Schools, and it's about... RAK Academy stands for Response to Active Killers. I'm encouraging my staff to see what we have in North Carolina. Let's look at that for the largest portion of what we do, but to also bring it outside training, outside the state, because I'm a firm believer from my experience at Quantico that we need to benchmark. We've always got to see where we're at compared to somewhere else. UNC systems brought in a canine course. That was great. The Gracie School, Gracie is a huge name in, I'll say defensive tactics, but it might be a little more narrow than that, but for law enforcement arrest techniques, things of that nature. That was just

trying to, you know, bring some of the leadership principles that were ingrained in me through the National Academy and exposure to all the great leaders that were back there. Empower our partners and our staff to be as creative as possible towards the mission.

Kirsten:

And so, any new updates coming this year?

Dir. Rebuck:

Well, we do have a two- to ten-year master plan that we're working on, and it's the second one. The founding director... I believe 2014 to 2022 would have been probably not exact but a pretty close date range for the first one. And that begins with, again, the number one priority which is the Center for Safer Schools and the initiative associated with that. So, we do have a lot of funding and effort going into the satellite campus. A fence is going up to just have a perimeter. That would be number one. Number two we're working on is a live fire shoot house. And I should mention the inside of the shoot house has some areas that are designed like a school, again, to train as close to reality as possible. A live fire shoot house is only to be used by advanced SWAT, for lack of a better term, but advanced tactics teams. The third would be a driving track. A fourth would be a laundry maintenance facility. Currently, we have 195 beds and, I believe, 186 rooms. So, we contract our linens right now, and we hope to have a commercial laundry facility for our housekeepers, so we can save money in the long run. And then our maintenance, we'll have a loading dock, and it'll have office space for both housekeepers and maintenance, and it will sit next to our maintenance compound.

Also, this year, we hope to have a running track with an outdoor fitness park in one end of it. We currently don't have a running track, and in my experience from Quantico, that track is rarely empty. You know, in the law enforcement profession, wellness and well-being are really huge over the last few years, and to encourage physical fitness along with time with the sun, green spaces, is good for our mental health and puts us in the best place to receive learning and to deliver learning. Because we have such a talented maintenance team, we're asking for a materials fund, and what it would do would give us the ability to purchase fire pits, picnic tables, barbecue grills. We have three large ponds on the campus, and two of those ponds are close to the dormitories. And I just envision a nice trail around them with different places to, you know, sit down and network. That's—that's so important, and so to have this ability in the evenings to do either organized functions or informal functions I think is huge to the mission.

We also want to join with SBI, ALE and then Task Force 8 here under DPS for a canine facility. So, we've had discussion about our maintenance team being able to build an obstacle course, put a six-foot chain link fence up. We haven't really selected exactly where we're going to put this. The Task Force 8 folks possibly will be able to bring a rubble pile down which is, again, training like reality with dogs, and that would be for human recovery, whether cadaver or live. You know, we're also looking at the different needs for a training platform for scent. Explosive dogs and digital media dogs are becoming much, much more

prominent. And we don't know, again, what exactly the future holds, but we—we hope to save money by having our maintenance team do as much as possible.

Kirsten: You've laid out a beautiful picture of what the future of the facility could hold. Any other goals or a vision for the training at Samarcand in this year or for the years to come?

Dir. Rebuck: Really to sum it up, just to stay on the cutting edge across *all* areas of the profession and—and from leadership to wellness to investigations and all the subcategories under that, you know, crime scene, interview and interrogation. I really want to collaborate with the Justice Academy and just make sure those needs are met. They don't have to be met at Samarcand, but I want to support them, and if that's just by having an agreement with Trevor and the Justice Academy, that's great. And—and then to—to be able to back each other up if each of us reach a point where we need help.

And a great example is just this past December Edneyville, which is the western campus of the Justice Academy, had an FTO school, and they didn't have dorm space. So, Trevor and I happened to be talking when this was discussed, and instead of spending extra money to put them in hotels, I just offered, “hey, if your instructors and the students are willing to go to Samarcand,” we'll host it. And that's what happened. So, I hope to, you know, just continue along that vein and be the very best that we can be in service of the law enforcement profession across the state and ultimately the citizens.

Kirsten: Gun violence is a major homeland security and public safety concern across the United States. In order to create a true culture of prevention, protection and preparedness, DPS is prioritizing school safety with ongoing school safety checks, the school risk and response management system managed by NC Emergency Management, DPS personnel participating in the Task Force for Safer Schools, this partnership between Samarcand Academy and the Center for Safer Schools plus several other initiatives. The department is focused on addressing the issue. For now, we work alongside partners to be prepared and harness skills that we hope to only use in the simulators on Samarcand's campus.

Conclusion

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Kirsten: This is the Safety Scoop, a podcast written, produced and edited by the NCDPS communications team. The mission of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety is to safeguard and preserve the lives and property of the people of North Carolina through prevention, protection and preparation. Follow the department on social media for a closer look at ongoing initiatives and resources. We're on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at NC Public Safety. If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to subscribe to the Safety Scoop on your favorite podcast app. I'm your host, Kirsten Barber. Thanks for listening.

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