Accessing Free Online and In-Person Training through the COPS Office Training Portal

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Hello. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. Today we are joined by two staff members of the Virginia Center for Policing Innovation, or VCPI. Sheila Gunderman—the Director of Programs for VCPI, which is the organization that manages the United States Department of Justice's COPS Office Training Portal—is with us. And with her is Evan Mishler, VCPI's Digital Design and Technology Master. Evan is an E-Learning Developer, specializing in the design, production, and implementation of multi-media learning solutions.

Recognizing both the significance of training and then the challenges that so many departments have training their officers due to budget constraints, lack of access to credible training resources, or even just the inability to pull officers off of patrol, the COPS Office partners with the Virginia Center for Policing Innovation, VCPI, to operate an on-line training portal that aims to make training available to the entire field, often at no cost.

Sheila, Evan, welcome to *The Beat*.

Sheila Gunderman

01:36
Thank you.

Evan Mishler

01:37
Thanks for having us.

Donelan

01:38
Sheila, let's begin with you. Tell us a little bit about VCPI, your history with the COPS Office, the portal, and the type of resources that you make available to law enforcement and their community partners.

Gunderman

01:51

Sure. Well, thanks again for having us. The Virginia Center for Policing Innovation has been a long-time partner of the COPS Office. We started in 1997 as one of the regional community-policing institutes that was funded through the COPS Office. And ever since, honestly, our partnership with the COPS Office has just grown and gotten stronger. In 2017, they awarded VCPI a cooperative agreement to start the portal and to administer all aspects of it. And we've been doing that ever since.

VCPI is a nonprofit organization. We're based in Richmond, Virginia, and we provide training services and consulting services, program management, technical assistance, all sorts of stuff to law enforcement organizations and their community partners all throughout the United States. One of the big components of our mission is to impact law enforcement and public safety in general, one person at a time. And in today's day and age, technology is the best way to do that. So our role with the portal and being a technology product, it just makes sense. We're honored to be so involved with the portal on a daily basis and we're just really happy to help promote it.

Donelan

02:58

And just to follow up just a little bit more about the portal, what specifically does it offer police agencies across the country?

Gunderman

03:05

The COPS Office Training Portal is an online clearinghouse for web-based learning tools, multimedia, e-learning packages, podcasts just like this, publications—anything you could possibly think of that the COPS Office has funded the development of—lives or will live on the portal. And it's just a convenient way for anybody who has internet access to grab resources that they need, and it's a place for all of those products that the COPS Office funds to live in one place for people to access them.

Donelan

03:36

Great. And your role with the portal?

Gunderman

03:38

My particular role with the portal is I oversee, sort of, the daily administration of it. I'm involved with everything from sometimes answering the phone if someone calls and is having trouble creating an account or accessing information that they need. I work with Evan and the rest of our team on communicating with other COPS organizations, COPS grantees that are going to be housing resources in the portal, to make sure that they're squared away and that they know how to load everything into our site when the time comes.

Donelan

03:51

Evan, tell us about your work with the COPS Office Training Portal.

Mishler

03:55

Yeah, so I do a little bit of the back-end, and some of the front-end things with the portal whether that's answering people's questions over email or phone calls, but also a lot of the back-end stuff where we're constantly trying to make the portal more usable, more user-friendly, a better experience for people trying to access the portal. And we really encourage people to reach out if they're having any problems or have suggestions. We can usually answer people's questions and get them signed up pretty quickly.

So that's a little bit about what I do with the portal. To kind of add to what Sheila was saying about what the portal's purpose is, and the resources available, the portal's really in its infancy right now. It's a growing thing. I know that, daily, we're making updates to it and I know that in the coming months we'll be adding tons of new content, new courses, new training pages for additional resources for anyone involved in public safety and law enforcement, community policing, obviously. So, yeah, that's what the portal's there for. And, again, we'll continue to build on it.

Donelan

05:01

So, as I'm listening to this, this is an obviously extremely interesting resource and I'm sure anyone who's listening to this wants to look it up. So how does someone find this on the web and how do they sign into it?

Mishler

05:12

Yeah, so it's really simple to get started. The web address is copstrainingportal.org.

Donelan

05:19

Can you spell that for us, please?

Mishler

05:21

It's C-O-P-S-T-R-A-I-N-I-N-G-P-O-R-T-A-L-dot-org, O-R-G, and once you get there, you'll find the landing page which is kind of a launching point to other resources on that landing page. If you see in the top right corner, you'll see a login button. That's where you'll get started with creating your account, if you haven't already created one. If you already have an account, you can just click login and that'll take you to all of the training resources that we have on the portal.

Donelan

05:57

When you log in for the first time, is there a credentialing process to verify that it's appropriate for you to be a user on this site? Is there any other criteria to access the site?

Mishler

06:07

Yes. The first time a user signs up, they will receive a confirmation email, and in that confirmation email they just need to click the link and that will take them back to the login page where they'll be able to sign in with the user name, usually their email address, and the password that they created for themselves.

Donelan

06:27

So, again, and I'll ask you this, Sheila. Can I log on as an individual officer or someone that's, just say, interested in policing? Or does it have to be through an agency, an official group?

Gunderman

06:37

That's a really good question. The portal is actually available for anyone. And there's nothing... There's no content that you would find to be law enforcement sensitive or classified information. The portal, and all the content on it truly is designed to be accessible to community members that are working with law enforcement organizations. And then, also, of course, any type of law enforcement officer.

Most of our users are sworn law enforcement officers. About 75 percent of the users identify as either patrol level officers, or mid-level supervisors, and about, I would say about 15 percent community members. And the other percentages based of federal employees and, sort of, other types of people. But, yeah, anybody can create an account. It takes like two minutes to do it. And we ask some real basic information about their name and their email address and an organization that they may be affiliated with, or that they choose to affiliate with in the portal. And all that information just helps us report back to the COPS Office on who's using it, who's accessing this information, and how are they using it.

Donelan

07:42

Okay, following up, Sheila. I've logged in. I'm a user now. I'm looking at trainings. Are all the trainings free or do any of them have a fee? What about in-person training too?

Gunderman

07:52

All of the resources that COPS Office grantee organizations develop, to my knowledge, are completely free. There's no tuition or registration fees to access them. So any information that a user might find when they log in is going to be free. And a lot of times people will email us and say, "Okay, so what's the cost? Like, you know, is it really free?" It really is free, which I know is, kind of, unheard of this day and age. But that's what this resource is designed to do, is to provide access to free online training.

Regarding the in-person courses that you mentioned, the portal houses, right now, information on in-person opportunities. And if someone visits the site and is really interested in one of those in-person opportunities, they would then contact that provider. So they can't actually register for an in-person event via the portal, but they can find information on how to do so. And from my understanding, those in-person opportunities are also free. One of the great things that the COPS Office does is providing access to zero-cost trainings, whether it's in person or online.

Donelan

08:54

Evan, can you tell us some of the topic areas that a user will find once they access the portal?

Mishler

08:59

Yeah, of course. So, some of the training topic areas, which, like I said before, they're kind of evolving with the way public safety and community policing is going. But currently some of the training topic areas are community policing, obviously, crime prevention, leadership, officer safety and wellness. We have tribal policing courses and resources, violent extremism, active shooter, and I know that we have a few more coming soon.

And, I guess, going along with those trainings on the actual COPS Portal website we have a few pages that we'll be expanding to include elder justice resources. Again, we have a tribal resources page. And those pages are meant to link to resources that anyone can follow the links and just jump to those providers, whether it's podcasts like *The Beat*, video series on *What's New in Blue*, those kind of things. There's publications as well. But, as far as the portal is concerned, the topic area is kind of aligned with the way the COPS Office funds their training. And, like I said, those are evolving and hopefully continue to evolve.

Donelan

10:12

Thank you, Evan. So the on-line training courses that you directly access via the portal, what's the average length, time, that it takes to go through one of the training courses? And then, secondly, to follow up, you don't necessarily develop the trainings yourself, you have grantees, or other partners that developed them. So, do the trainings differ from one training to training?

Mishler

10:31

It's hard to put an average length on the resources. Some of them are short video clips. Some are five-module, full online courses, and really, I would guess anywhere from one hour to four hours it would take a user to get through one course and a lot of that depends on what the user wants to get out of it. If you follow through a course and you are proactive and you click through all the links, it might take you a little bit longer, but you're getting the full experience of the course. Not everyone is going to do it that way, and that's the beauty of it. Most of the courses are self-paced. You can click through as fast or as slow as you want. Some people will go through them faster. But we hope that at least people are getting something out of the courses. And we have pre- and posttests for a lot of the courses, actually, all of the courses that aren't just video resources. And we like to see what people get on the pretest versus the posttest. And we hope that people are gaining knowledge throughout.

Donelan

11:30

Sheila, anything to add?

Gunderman

11:32

Yeah, just to add a little bit to what Evan said. It really is the beauty of the resources in the portal that they're designed to meet your needs, like whoever you are, visiting the portal. If you are a patrol officer and you only have 15 minutes before your shift starts, or on your break, or whatever, you can log in, take 15 minutes, and either explore a resource, or take a little piece of a module and come back later and it'll pick you up right where you left off. And that's a really neat feature of this, because we know how busy law enforcement officers are, and this is just a flexible resource for them.

Donelan

12:08

Great. Thank you. In this day and age with so many people living digitally and online, that's just a great way for people to get information. But there are those out there who still like to do it the old-fashioned way with in-person training, in-person information. So if I see a topic on there, how do I find out if it's offered in-person, and what are the steps that I would take to get in-person training for either a small group, or maybe, say, my entire department?

Gunderman

12:34

So if someone is interested in in-person training—and we completely believe in in-person training, e-learning is never going to replace in-person training and I know the COPS Office feels that way too—there are in-person training opportunities that people can find out information about on the site. That kind of fluctuates with the funding too, so on any given day it might be different. But each of the current in-person training providers and courses has a link on the portal that takes you directly to that provider's home page where you can contact that provider about whatever resources they have to offer. And, also,

people could contact the portal. We have an email address that we monitor all the time and we'll give it to you at the end of the podcast, but it's also on the website. And if someone wants more information on one of the in-person courses and they're not getting it, they can email us and we'll be happy to connect them with a provider that they need to reach out to.

Donelan
13:25
And just talking again about e-learning versus in-person learning, do you think that there's a benefit for one versus the other, or do they each have their own place?

Gunderman
13:36
I'll let Evan answer this in a second, but personally, I think there's a great role for both of them. I think e-learning is a fantastic way to get lots of people on the same page and speaking the same language, I guess, if you want to say. I don't think it'll ever replace the need for in-person training, especially for law enforcement officers, but as a supplemental resource, 100 percent.

Donelan
13:57
Evan, what are your thoughts?

Mishler
13:58
Piggybacking on what Sheila said, we truly believe in the blended learning approach. We want these online resources to reach as many people as possible. And I know that sometimes that's just not possible with online training. A lot of these agencies may have restricted funds and so it's difficult to send officers to in-person training. So we hope that these online resources really help people get a base knowledge of these topic areas that I mentioned earlier. But, certainly, again, we don't anticipate online training taking over for in-person training anytime soon. And a good example of that is tactical training. It's hard to do tactical training online. It's something that you kind of need a hands-on approach. So, again, we encourage people to reach out to the in-person training providers that are listed on the portal if they want to further their development in those topic areas.

Donelan
14:56
So as far as the vetting process, is there a vetting process in terms of people being qualified to be listed on the portal? I assume that just not anybody can post onto the portal. What is the process so that I, as a user, know that behind this training there's some gravitas?

Gunderman

15:12

All of the resources that live on the portal right now, and I believe this is the plan for the future, is they've all been funded by the COPS Office. So, there's no third party vendor, training vendors. There's lots of training companies out there. Officers are probably inundated with training offers from different companies. Any information that they're going to find on the portal is something that the Department of Justice has funded the development of. And from our own experience in developing courses over the years, the process for vetting the curriculum, not only the provider, but the curriculum itself, the content of your video, or your publication, or your e-learning course, it's pretty extensive. And I'm not sure that an average police officer would realize that.

So, I think this podcast hopefully will help people maybe feel more comfortable that anything they're going find on there has gone through, probably, months of review. And all the way up to DOJ attorneys that vet the content. It's extremely reliable. I would imagine that if something becomes out of date, if there's some sort of information that's on the portal that a practice becomes outdated or something, that material will come down. So I think people can feel pretty confident that what they're going to get on the portal is pretty solid material.

Donelan

16:32

So, there are some people who believe you get what you pay for, and if the training is free, some may wonder if the training really isn't worth it. But again, this training has the stamp of approval of the Department of Justice. So, should that communicate to users that this is really worthy training?

Gunderman

16:48

Yeah, absolutely. I mean just because this has a free price tag, that has nothing to do with the quality of the material that people are going to find here. I get that people are suspicious, nothing is free these days, but this truly is. The Department of Justice has invested a good amount of money in developing this portal to house all of these resources, which they've also developed, invested a lot of money in the development of. So in this case, I think the fact that this stuff is free should just make it even that more appealing to organizations that have very limited training budgets and in-house resources to do this on their own.

Donelan

17:34

So of the trainings that are currently offered on the website, we know that they change from time to time, but what are the ones you've seen that are the most popular, the ones that have been accessed the most? Is that something that you can tell us about, Sheila?

Gunderman

17:37

Right now, and again like you've said, this could probably change any day, but so far the courses that are the foundational community-policing courses have been the most active enrollments. And I think that just kind of speaks to the need for community-policing training and we've seen a lot of entire departments that are coming through the portal. Officer, after officer, after officer, are logging on and taking the community-policing courses. So the foundational community-policing ones are strong right now. And, also, we were just running some numbers that the Ethical Decision Making course is a really strong one right now too. And I couldn't tell you exactly why, other than I think that's always an important topic, and probably top of mind for law enforcement officers as they're doing their jobs on a daily basis. That one's been pretty popular. There are a few courses in there that are more targeted or specific in their topic focus area. So, I can see why maybe those wouldn't be as widely participated in as some of these other, bigger topics. But truly, the community-policing ones seem to be the biggest draw right now.

Donelan

18:42

Extremely interesting. Now as far as your users, who do you find are accessing the portal the most? Do you take that sort of big picture look at the users?

Gunderman

18:53

We do. Right now we have participants representing pretty much every state in the United States, which is pretty cool. Probably more than a dozen countries, law enforcement organizations from other countries, that are accessing the portal, which is also really cool. And in terms of the individual users, about 75 percent of what we're seeing right now is law enforcement officers. Mostly patrol out of that 75 percent, the majority of them are front-line officers who are actually out working. And then beyond that it would be their immediate supervisors.

And then we have a few law enforcement executives, or more than a few, I should say. But a smaller percentage of executive-level law enforcement leaders that are accessing the portal, which makes sense. The line-level officers are the ones who usually are required to take more training, and they aren't going to conferences and things like that executive-level leaders are going to. So, I think that the content on the portal is perfect for patrol-level officers, so I think it's great that they're the ones who are accessing it the most.

Donelan

19:54

So, besides the education and the knowledge that I am going to gain as an individual from the trainings, is there any other benefit? Say, a learning credit or something like that?

Gunderman

20:04

We get a lot of questions about, because it's very... It's an important aspect of law enforcement training is, can I get credit for this, or can I count this towards my in-service? It is a very common question we get. And I would say on a national scope, I think that law enforcement organizations are still trying to figure out how to handle e-learning. Even though it's been around for probably more than 10 years, it's still fairly new. And it's just very different from a classroom experience in terms of tracking time. But I will say we are in the process of exploring with the COPS Office, the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training, IADLEST. They have a national certification program.

The COPS Office has partnered with IADLEST, and it's in the early stages of developing a national certification program where an organization like the COPS Office Training Portal, or any individual training company or training vendor can submit their content, their curriculum, their e-learning courses to IADLEST for review. And based on the results of that review, they can have this sort of blanket national certification. And some states are recognizing that, and automatically it conveys to an officer's account. Some states aren't there yet, so we're still in the process of exploring it. But, I would say, bottom line, if an officer takes an e-learning course in the portal, or elsewhere, and feels like it should apply to their in-service, or their professional development, they can go through the process themselves of trying to get credit for it. Most states have a mechanism in place for that. If you as an officer, on your own, take a training opportunity and want to submit the required documentation to let it be certified, most states have that. But just right now, as like a blanket approval for everything on the portal, we're not there yet.

Donelan

22:00

Okay. Another scenario: I'm on staff at a training academy, or I'm in a leadership role. How would you suggest that I promote the portal, encourage its use by officers?

Mishler

22:12

The most important way to promote the portal is word of mouth. And we really hope that people will use these online training resources and talk to their buddies about it. And we hope the training is truly that good that people want to share what they're getting out of it.

We have a section on the online site where people can promote the portal. So people can download a PDF, a poster, that can be either sent via email to their department, or a poster put up in a break room to just kind of tell more people about the portal and what kind of resources are on there. And we hope people use those resources. We hope the departments are putting these up in their break rooms. We hope that people are talking about it to their friends.

Donelan

22:57

And, again, these resources, these promotional marketing resources are available for download on the portal site.

Mishler

23:02

Correct, yes.

Donelan

23:04

Well, in these days and times everybody likes to talk about what they're doing on social media. They like to talk about what they like, what they don't like. Is there a place for people to discuss the benefits of the trainings? So, do you have a Facebook page?

Gunderman

23:17

There is a Facebook page. We have just, kind of, got it started. I know we're behind the times on that, but that's okay. But we do have Facebook page. It's just COPS Office Training Portal. And, what we plan to share on there is just updates any time new courses are added, any time a new resource is added, sharing some testimonials, maybe? There, there's lots of departments, like we mentioned earlier, that they're having all of their officers go through a community-policing class. So, getting testimonials from them, that we can post and share, I think on social media is a great way to get the word out.

In addition to everything that Evan mentioned, when somebody comes to the portal for the first time, they can subscribe to our quarterly—right now it's quarterly—update where we're going to just send an email to whatever address you provide and briefly tell you, kind of, what's up with the portal. What's new, what's coming, what you can expect, and things like that. So, if anybody does go visit the portal, and I hope you do after you listen, please subscribe, because we'd love to stay in touch with you and keep you posted on everything that's going on.

Donelan

24:16

Evan, do you have anything to add to that?

Mishler

24:18

We really, really encourage people to subscribe and especially now, with the amount of content that we're adding. We know that we have courses coming soon, and we really want to keep people engaged. And, hopefully, people will subscribe and they'll get those updates on when new resources are available. And, hopefully, it's something that they can take back to their department and use in their daily lives.

So, yeah, we really encourage people to subscribe and we're hoping to add more courses very often. And we know that the COPS Office is really committed to getting more resources onto the portal. So, again, please go subscribe. And right now you can find that subscription just at the bottom of the home page. You'll also, potentially, get a pop-up that allows you to click through and subscribe there. But, yeah, we hope to keep being in communication with all our users about the cool new resources that we're providing.

Donelan
25:15
Evan, would you again tell us again the web address for the portal?

Mishler
25:18
The web address for the portal is copstrainingportal.org. And that is C-O-P-S-T-R-A-I-N-I-N-G-P-O-R-T-A-L-dot-org. And once you're on the site, you can explore all of the available resources. If you run into any problems logging in, or have any questions for us, you can give us a call. The phone number is 833-650-7910. And you can also email us at info@copstrainingportal.com. That is info, I-N-F-O, at C-O-P-S-T-R-A-I-N-I-N-G-P-O-R-T-A-L-dot- org.

Donelan
26:09
And again, if they want to find you on Facebook, they just search for the COPS Training Portal.

Mishler
26:14
Yes.

Donelan
26:15
We've been speaking with Sheila Gunderman and Evan Mishler of the Virginia Center for Policing Innovation, VCPI, about the COPS Office Training Portal. And I have one last question for you, Sheila. Is there anything that I haven't asked that you think our listeners should know?

Gunderman
26:30
I would just encourage people to go check it out. Check out the portal on your own time. If you are a training person, if your responsibility within your organization is to find training resources for your officers and for your personnel, go check it out. I encourage you to just poke around. Create an account, take all the courses for yourself, and sort of audit them. See if you think that they'd be a good fit for the needs that your organization has. And, if they do, encourage people to sign up. I think that's how we've gotten so many organizations that we have, that have signed everybody up. I think they have one or two people that, sort of, take the lead on vetting for themselves the materials, and then they suggest everybody else do it.

I think for training people... I've worked for VCPI for almost 16 years and seen a lot of changes in funding and things like that. And I know for the last five years or so, people's training budgets are tight. And even if you're with a large organization that is well resourced and well funded, I think everybody wants to use training dollars and resources wisely these days. And I think accessing what the portal has to offer just makes sense.

If I was a chief, or if I was the training director of a law enforcement academy, I would absolutely check out what the portal has to offer, because I think that the COPS Office does a great job of funding what's important in law enforcement and I think the resources that are on here, just provide a ton of value for law enforcement, whether you're on the east coast, or the west coast, or somewhere in the south, or in an urban environment, a rural environment, there really is something for everybody. And I think the more that we get the word out about this and the more officers and organizations we get using it, I think, bringing community policing, or keeping community policing at the forefront of everybody's minds, I think the portal is the perfect way to do that.

Donelan

28:28

Well I'm certainly going to start looking things up on this amazing portal because I am excited about it. I also know that this is going to be a great resource for any officer or agency who really is looking for better policing ideas and training methods. So I thank you, Sheila and Evan, for joining us today on *The Beat*, and I wish you great luck and continued success with the COPS Office Training Portal. Thank you.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

28:53

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

29:51

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