

There is nothing anyone could have done to prepare for the tragedy that took place on December 14 in Newtown, Connecticut.

That hasn't stopped the local law enforcement community from training as much as they can should a similar situation arise in Washington County.

That's why during a recent week, members of the Salem Police Department and the Washington County Sheriff's Department spent time at both West Washington and East Washington taking part in Active Shooter training.

"This is as close as you can get to real, without it being real," said Washington County Sheriff Claude Combs of the training exercises.

A gunman was inside a classroom and teams of officers – one, two and three – deep, were tasked with finding and eliminating the threat.

The training included live ammunition which are basically paint pellets packing a lot more force.

Todd Combs and Brent Miller, both with the Washington County Sheriff's Department, have been to school for active shooter training they use to train officers in this county.

Claude Combs said he and his son, Todd and Miller come up with the scenarios and they also use situations that other training organizations use.

"The whole program is designed to make you think quickly," the elder Combs said. "The adrenaline gets flowing. When the bullets start flying they fly at a heavy rate and we want to see how people react."

Combs said the sheriff's department started the Active Shooter Training in 2007.

The sheriff's department paid for the training and the equipment, which includes the ammunition, hand guns and rifles, were purchased through a collaborate effort with them and the three school systems. He said the initial investment in the training equipment was between \$10,000 and \$12,000.

While the recent training took place in the schools, Combs said the scope goes beyond that type of scenario.

"This training is not just about schools," Combs said. "This training prepares us for schools, daycares, churches, hospitals and businesses. It's active shooter! If there is a situation with an active shooter, this training is preparing us for that."

In 2007 when his department started in the training, Combs said it was taught that officers should arrive on the scene and wait for a team of five before locating and eliminating the threat.

Over the years, it has been discovered that in a hostile situation, there is no time to waste.

That was the focus of the recent training.

"The philosophy is that we are not waiting for backup," Combs said. "The first guy on the scene is going to go find the threat and eliminate it. It has been proven that these situations don't last very long and people are getting killed. We don't have time to stand out front and wait for a team of guys to show up.

"Even in a large city it can take up to six minutes to have a five-man team. What can happen in six minutes? In our training scenario we are concentrating on teams of ones, twos and threes.

That's because we think that's what our response will be should something happen. We have worked on four and five people teams, but we are prepared to do it with one, two, three, however many is there."

The Christmas break provided the opportunity for officers to get inside the school without anyone being there.

Combs said they are planning more training over the summer on a much larger scale.

He said he hopes to have a scenario where first responders, EMA and everyone who would be involved can participate.

As for the recent round of training, Combs said it has been beneficial to all who took part.

"I think we've seen some good things," he said. "These guys have honed their skills. They make mistakes we point them out and they get better."

Miller said there are plenty of people who think that can stop tragedies from happening, law enforcement

"I don't think you are going to be able to stop this type of thing from happening," he said. "We are training to change or lesson the end result of something like this."

Combs said they haven't trained in Salem Schools, but that's more timing than anything else.