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## Cops need non-lethal options

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By MIKE KELLY - RECORD COLUMNIST

Runt-Runt was in a fighting mood. He almost became a cop's worst nightmare.

The story of Runt-Runt, an 18-month-old Paterson pit bull with a vicious streak, is not so much a story of canine misbehavior but police behavior -- and what happens when officers' hands are tied by backward rules.

The story began Friday afternoon in a house on Paterson's North Bridge Street. The city's elite police Emergency Response Team broke in and ran upstairs, searching for drug dealers. An animal control officer followed, carrying a pole with a loop on one end to subdue unruly dogs.

Runt-Runt did more than just bark. He resisted arrest. As the animal control officer approached, Runt-Runt lunged. Several ERT cops fired their guns and killed the dog. But at least one bullet passed through the floor -- and struck a cop on the first floor.

Luckily, Officer Robert Klein was not seriously wounded. The bullet hit him in the arm. He was quickly taken to a hospital, patched up and released.

But if Klein had been standing just an inch or two in another direction, the bullet might have struck him in the head or neck.

The Passaic County prosecutor has since cleared ERT cops of any wrongdoing in firing their weapons. But the incident leaves an important question unanswered: Why don't cops have other options besides firing their guns in such confrontations?

Actually, there are plenty of alternatives. But state law blocks cops from using them.

New Jersey is the only state that bars cops from using stun guns, even against animals. Other non-lethal weapons, from guns that shoot bean bags to gas pellets, are also banned.

In general, New Jersey police are forced to rely on a limited arsenal -- firearms, nightsticks, pepper spray or their own hands. Such high-tech weapons as electronic Taser guns that strike an unmanageable suspect with powerful electrical jolts are illegal.

The lack of choices is not a new problem for cops, especially in dealing with mentally disturbed people. In 2005, Wayne police shot and killed a 43-year-old father with a history of psychological problems after he approached them with a large kitchen knife. They said they had no alternative.

"We're extremely limited in our options," said Chief Leo Selb of Woodbury Heights, one of only a handful of stun gun instructors in the state.

New Jersey's police chiefs association, which represents most of the state's more than 500 chiefs, has been trying for at least three years to persuade state officials to study the use of non-lethal weapons. Indeed, the association's executive director, Mitchell Sklar, said he has nominated Selb and other experts in non-lethal force at least three times to serve on a study group.

Trenton lawmakers and other state officials have not responded, Sklar said. But that intransigence may be changing.

On Wednesday, the state Attorney General's Office said a task force to assess non-lethal weapons may be formed within weeks. "It's being done," spokesman David Wald said. But Wald cautioned that the task force's goal was merely to study the use of non-lethal weapons, not necessarily to endorse them.

Last Friday's shooting in Paterson ought to be at the top of the agenda for this task force. This time, cops were lucky. Only a pit bull died.

Next time, who knows?

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