

THE REGISTER GUARD - OREGON

Police panel eyes Tasers in wake of fatal shooting

By Rebecca Nolan - The Register-Guard

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There's no guarantee that a Taser would have saved Ryan Salisbury's life.

But the Eugene Police Commission wants to explore whether the stun guns and additional police training in dealing with people with mental health issues could prevent another officer-involved fatal shooting such as the one that killed Salisbury on Nov. 14.

Salisbury, 19, was shot in his parents' driveway while advancing on police officers with a large kitchen knife after a violent rampage that prompted his family to barricade themselves in a bedroom. Officers had ordered him to drop the knife and had fired several beanbag rounds in an unsuccessful attempt to stop him.

His family said the young man suffered from anxiety and bipolar disorders and may have been in a psychotic state that night. He had threatened to stab himself and had ingested a potentially lethal dose of rat poison during the episode.

The district attorney found that the officers involved violated no laws, and the department is examining its policies, procedures and training, with a report expected in coming weeks.

The shooting sparked community discussion about the training and equipment available to Eugene police officers, and the shortcomings of the mental health system.

On Thursday, the 12-member police commission joined the conversation.

The advisory body voted to explore whether Tasers would be a beneficial addition to the department's arsenal of less-lethal weapons.

Tasers have long been controversial. They fire two fishhook-like probes into a person's clothes or skin. Insulated wire attaches the probes to the Taser unit. Officers can administer a 50,000-volt jolt from up to 25 feet away. Although the stun guns are viable alternatives to bullets in life-or-death situations, they have been blamed for dozens of deaths around the country since their adoption by police - primarily when used on people with medical conditions or high levels of drugs in their systems.

The Eugene department has postponed acquiring Tasers until good policies governing their use are developed. Officers in Springfield and Junction City already use the devices.

The decision to consider the tools marks a shift in some commissioners' thinking.

"A year ago, I would have said, 'Over my dead body,' " police Commissioner Carla Newbre said. "I believed that Tasers were extremely dangerous and that under no circumstances should they be used ... I've come to realize that in-custody deaths occur for specific reasons, under specific conditions."

Newbre and other commissioners agreed that Tasers should not be used casually, but as an alternative to deadly force, to prevent their misuse.

The move has support from the local police union. The executive board of the Eugene Police Employees' Association sent a memo to the police chief Tuesday asking the department to fast-track the process of arming officers with Tasers. The memo describes an increase in violent threats to officers and citizens by criminal suspects and people suffering from mental illness.

"The availability of Tasers, in many cases, could possibly allow us to safely subdue them without resorting to deadly force," the union board wrote. "Not having Tasers along with the training and reasonable policy in their use is a tragedy waiting to happen."

Eugene Police Chief Robert Lehner said he is working with the local ACLU chapter and is prepared to move forward with a pilot project once a solid policy is in place. Although Tasers have proved most effective when used on mentally ill people armed with sharp-edged weapons, they often fail, as occurred in a recent police shooting in Springfield, he said.

In that case, a Taser blast appeared to have no effect on a wanted man who claimed to be armed with a gun. An officer ultimately shot the man as he continued to advance, killing him. He was unarmed.

"Tasers are not magic," Lehner said. "They are no panacea. They can cause death."

But, he said, "I would have loved to have had our officers have that tool available" the night of the Salisbury shooting.

The commission also agreed Thursday to research more training for officers who confront people in the midst of mental health crises, while acknowledging that police officers' role in society is to enforce the law, not to serve as mental health care providers.

Some commissioners suggested creating a specialized team of officers with advanced training, a kind of mental health SWAT team.

"This community wants something more than just an additional tool, another piece of equipment," said Commissioner Charles Zennach<142>, who made the motion.