

Courier

UNI public safety head makes pitch for stun guns on campus

Zarifis says his officers need protection of tasers.

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CEDAR FALLS

Dave Zarifis believes his campus police officers should be carrying more than pepper spray and collapsible batons, and he's hoping to convince others the M-26 taser, the latest-model stun gun, is the answer.

On Monday, Zarifis, the University of Northern Iowa's director of public safety, spoke with the UNI faculty senate to gain its support in arming his force with the tasers. He fears sending officers into potentially violent situations without the proper means to protect themselves.

"If I can't protect those who are designated to protect you, then we have a problem," Zarifis said.

While the faculty senate won't be involved in the final decision, he hopes the presentations could help the members vote to support the tasers, a decision eventually up to the state Board of Regents and University President Robert Koob.

The faculty senate vote on whether to support purchasing the tasers at next month's meeting.

Today's taser looks and works much different than the stun guns introduced nearly a generation ago. The M-26 taser Zarifis showed the group looks like a handgun and would be worn as one. It shoots a cube-shaped cartridge up to 21 feet that disables the target.

Faculty senate member Katherine van Wormer, a professor in the university's Department of Social Work, isn't too keen on the tasers.

"Dave spoke here years ago about having lethal weapons and (showed us guns)," van Wormer said. "I see this as a stepping stone to get lethal weapons, to get weapons they don't need."

There are 18 officers on the campus' safety force. Zarifis said each taser costs around \$400 and each cartridge about \$18. But Zarifis said if people expect protection from the safety force, the officers need the tasers. He emphasized personnel would be thoroughly trained in how and when to use them.

"These are fully certified peace officers," Zarifis said. "These are people who could leave my department and work for the Cedar Falls or Waterloo police departments without any problem."

Campus officers now carry pepper spray and collapsible batons. In a potentially dangerous situation they call the Cedar Falls police and stand by until officers arrive.

"We can't be sure of the response we can get from the CFPD," Zarifis said. "On busy nights they have to prioritize."

Faculty senate member Tom Romanin said he's seen an increase in aggressive behavior on campus over the years.

"Several years ago I would have been less inclined to move this way," he said of obtaining the stun guns. "But there's more aggressive behavior being dealt with by the Cedar Falls Police Department."

Van Wormer disagreed.

"There is no proof that the crime rate is going up," she said. "Expense is another question, with all the budget cuts."

But Zarifis wants his officers to be able to defend themselves should a bad situation arise.

"If you send someone into harm's way constantly, sometime they're going to get harmed," he said.