

City Club Shocker

Auditor, police chief back Tasers, despite abuse

Eugene's new police auditor, Mark Gissiner, sided with the police chief against civil liberties advocates calling for restrictions on Taser use at the Eugene City Club July 31.

"In the United States of America we should consider it a good tool," said Gissiner.

But Claire Syrett of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) faulted EPD for unnecessarily using a lethal weapon linked to hundreds of deaths in America. "Tasers should be used only as an alternative to deadly force," Syrett said, citing ACLU's recommendation that the Eugene police change their Taser policy.

Asked whether EPD would change their loose policy to only use Tasers as an alternative to deadly force, acting Police Chief Pete Kerns answered, "No."

The current EPD policy contains few if any effective restrictions on the use of Tasers. Police video from May 2008 has documented an EPD officer Taser-ing an unarmed environmental protestor twice in the back while he lay face down on the ground with his arms pinned under his side or held behind his back.

An annual report by the acting police auditor and Citizens Review Board written before Gissiner came to Eugene last month found other inappropriate Taser use by EPD. For example, Eugene police Tasered a non-responsive, non-threatening mentally ill man who was standing still. The auditor/CRB report stated, "Members of the community share our concern that the [Taser] is being used too often as a pain compliance tool and not in a manner in which it represents a clear alternative to lethal force."

After the City Club debate, Gissiner stood with a group of police officers, nodding and agreeing with their statements supporting Tasers. Asked about the CRB/Auditor report, Gissiner claimed he had read it but could not remember the Taser passages. "It was a pretty lengthy report," he said. Gissiner declined to comment on the appropriateness of using the Taser on the non-threatening, mentally ill victim.

Gissiner was hired with the enthusiastic backing of conservative city councilors highly critical of previous independent auditors who have questioned EPD use of force. But Gissiner denied he would make the supposedly independent police auditor function more pro-police. "I'm neutral," Gissiner said.

Gissiner said Cincinnati, Ohio, where he worked on police oversight was "very conservative," but he had opposed Taser use in one case. He said he supports Tasers "only if they're used in an appropriate manner."

The auditor/CRB report called for equipping all EPD Tasers, rather than just a few, with video cameras like the one that caught the police shocking the environmental protestor. But Kerns refused, arguing the cameras aren't worth the money.

"It's because they don't want to be filmed using them," said Lauren Regan, director of the Civil Liberties Defense Center in Eugene. Regan cited a \$6 million verdict against another city for a Taser-induced heart attack and warned that taxpayers may end up covering the bill for EPD Taser misuse.

"Tasers are unregulated, dangerous deadly weapons that are fraught with abuse," Regan said. She cited national studies linking Tasers to 371 deaths, indicating Tasers increase deaths without decreasing officer injuries, and indicating Tasers are used overwhelmingly against people who are unarmed and minorities.

Regan said the 50,000-volt weapons are most often used as "a form of torture" and "terrorism" to get non-dangerous people to follow officer orders or to punish them on the street without a trial. "They are in essence high-tech cattle prods," she said.

"The Eugene Police Department cannot be trusted with Tasers," said Regan, who drew the biggest applause at the City Club. She cited the auditor/CRB report stating that with Eugene police, "force, once required, too quickly escalates to excessive force and injury to the arrestee."

Eugene police used their fatal shooting of Ryan Salisbury in 2006 to justify getting Tasers. But Regan cited multiple studies indicating Tasers are far less effective with mentally ill people. She noted that police had already shot Salisbury with multiple bags of lead shot from a shotgun (bean bags). A Taser also "would probably have been ineffective on him."

"I don't think our policy now reflects the majority values of our community," Syrett of the ACLU said. But she said she doubted the EPD would change the policy. "If we want to affect a difference, citizens are going to have to make their voices heard."

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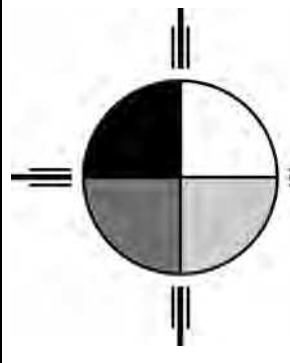
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