

Armed officers at VA may be excessive for area's needs

Why?

That's the natural question to ask upon hearing the recent news that police officers at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in St. Cloud now are equipped with guns.

The bureaucratic answer is: It's part of a nationwide VA mandate.

But that official statement, complete with phrases like "expecting the best in protection and police services," rings somewhat hollow in Central Minnesota.

If this was Chicago, New York or even the Twin Cities, it might seem more pressing to give guns to people who patrol a hospital.

Remember, though, ours is a VA hospital with more than 480 units for nursing home care. It's designed to serve a mostly suburban and rural population.

Perhaps St. Cloud VA officials could make the need more convincing if they would relate in detail the security threats officers deal with daily. What kind of crime or violence takes place at a health-care facility that merits people carrying firearms?

Unfortunately, VA spokeswoman Rose Blesener said such information must be kept confidential because it often involves patients.

But even St. Cloud Hospital, which has the region's biggest trauma center, doesn't give its security staff firearms. Yet it probably sees and treats many more front-line victims of today's violence than the VA. Gang bangers. Beaten-up spouses. People on drugs.

Bill Becker, director of security and safety at St. Cloud Hospital since 1976, is quick to point out hospitals and their security forces must mirror society when addressing violence.

Whatever happens in a community, a hospital's security force must be trained and equipped to deal with it.

But even Becker can't envision the need to provide guards with guns.

That's not to say St. Cloud Hospital guards aren't well-equipped. To the contrary. They are.

Since Feb. 1, St. Cloud Hospital's 13 officers have carried Taser guns, less-than-lethal weapons that deliver a 50,000-volt electrical current to a person, causing temporary immobility and allowing authorities to take control of the person.

Tasers, along with things like beanbag or stun guns, are relatively new rungs on what law enforcement calls its "ladder of force." The ladder starts with talking and moves upward to physical intervention, pepper spray, batons, non-lethal weapons and, at the top, firearms.

So perhaps that is what is most unsettling about the VA's decision to arm its police officers. Instead of adding a Taser rung, the jump was made to the top of the ladder by adding guns.