

APD: Year-Old TASER Program Saves Lives

By Jeff Jones

Journal Staff Writer

A year-old Albuquerque Police Department program that has armed hundreds of officers with nonlethal "ADVANCED TASERS" is already paying big dividends in saved lives, fewer scuffles and fewer injuries, the department says.

A burglary suspect who allegedly came toward officers with a knife in his hand on Aug. 4 could very well owe his life to the Advanced TASER that stopped him cold with a 50,000-volt jolt but did not injure him, said police Sgt. Cornel Heitzman, who's helping to oversee the program.

Heitzman said the man is one of about 30 suspects whom officers have used the TASERS on since August 2000, when the City Council appropriated \$180,000 to pay for hundreds of the potent devices that resemble futuristic handguns.

Stopping suspects without having to wrestle them to the ground saves injuries to officers and the people they're arresting, Heitzman said. And being able to stop an advancing armed suspect without resorting to deadly force means one less potential lawsuit — and much less trauma for the officer, the suspect and his or her family, he said.

"If this program hasn't paid for itself as of this date, it will in the next month," Heitzman said in an interview last week.

Police Chief Jerry Galvin also called the program a success and said, "As the years go on, I'm sure we'll have more and more saves."

City Councilor Tim Kline, who co-sponsored the push to fund the TASER program, called the weapons "an essential tool for public safety."

Some patrol officers still don't have TASERS, and Kline said he would like to see that change. He said he is sending a letter to the APD this week asking the agency to try to find grant money to buy more TASERS.

If no grant money can be found, "I'll look at other resources and see what we can find," Kline said Tuesday. "I guess it's called 'creative financing.'"

The APD has shot and killed gun-toting suspects since the TASER program began. Heitzman said it would almost never be appropriate to try to use a TASER in situations where a suspect has a gun.

The move to put more TASERS in APD officers' hands started in July 2000 after officers shot and killed a man who reportedly had threatened to kill them and was coming at them with a knife. One officer shot that suspect with beanbag shotgun rounds, which are meant to stop a suspect without killing him. But the beanbag rounds did not stop the attacker. The department at that time had only a few of the Advanced TASERS. The City Council appropriation allowed the APD to buy about 380 more, said APD acting fiscal manager Frieda Lehner.

Most patrol officers and all patrol sergeants now have the TASERS, Heitzman said. Members of the APD Repeat Offender Project and SWAT team members also have them.

Lehner said the APD has purchased a few more TASERS with other money and has more than 400 of them, but she said about 550 officers do some form of street work.

"We could definitely use a few more," she said of the weapons.

The TASERS use eight AA batteries to create 26 watts of energy, Heitzman said. To use the TASERS, officers aim them at close-range suspects and pull the trigger — sending two small darts attached to wires into the suspect's clothing or skin.

"The current hits you before the barbs hit you. Nobody ever feels the probes stick," Heitzman said.

He said the TASERS basically override the body's central nervous system. Many people simply fall over, though some stop in place and can't move while the electricity courses through them.

Heitzman said almost all of the officers trained in TASER use volunteered to get a quick jolt to see what it felt like. He compared it to "getting hit with two fastballs simultaneously" but said pain isn't the right word to describe the feeling.

"It rocks your world. It grabs your attention like it's never been grabbed before — and when it's over, it's completely over," Heitzman said. "It's very interesting when you feel your muscle cramp to its fullest — and you're not telling it to cramp."

Any time police have to fight with a suspect to get him or her handcuffed, Heitzman said, there's the potential for injuries. That can mean an emergency-room visit for the suspect or an injury to an officer that can force him or her off the streets and into a desk job for a time until the injury heals.

"Anytime there's physical contact, there's going to be an injury. Twisted knees. Separated shoulders. And then you get the torn uniforms," Heitzman said.

Heitzman said not every TASER shot is a success — they're not effective when the batteries in them are low, and they sometimes don't work when either of the two darts misses the suspect. But he said only a handful of the APD TASER shots have ended in failure, and he recently compiled a partial list of the incidents this year in which the TASERS appear to have prevented a struggle or a shooting.

According to Heitzman's report, one such incident happened on July 15 when police had to deal with a suicidal woman on Palo Duro NE who had placed a razor blade in her mouth.

Officer J.T. Stone, who shot the woman with the TASER, said during an interview on Tuesday that the woman also was holding a knife to her own throat. He said he deployed the TASER as she pressed the knife into her neck.

The woman received a 5-second TASER burst and pulled the knife away from her neck, Stone said. She received one more burst and dropped the blade.

Stone said he later told his supervisors, "Thank God."