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Tasers effective for Atlantic Beach

Suspects, animals unharmed by use

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In addition to crime suspects, Atlantic Beach police have used their Taser stun guns on a diseased cat stuck in the wheel well of car and an aggressive pit bull.

It was for the officers' protection as well as the animals, police said.

Atlantic Beach police, the only department at the Beaches to use the stun guns, were called by animal control officers to help get the cat from the car after animal control personnel couldn't reach the feline. An officer used his 26-watt stun gun to incapacitate the cat, which fell out of the wheel well.

The pit bull was a different story. Atlantic Beach officers were assisting as Jacksonville Sheriff's officers enforced an eviction when an aggressive pit bull approached the officers. The stun gun was used on the dog, which scampered away and did not bother police again.

"If we can use it on humans, then it's safe enough for animals," said Atlantic Beach Police Chief David Thompson.

"We thought the Taser was the better choice. It was an alternative to using deadly force."

Since April, when the police force began to put them to use, Atlantic Beach officers have used the Taser 22 times without any injuries to the officers, suspects or animals. The Taser, which looks like a handgun, fires two metal tips that are like straightened fish hooks. The hooks, or "probes," are attached to the Taser with wires that can extend up to 21 feet. The hooks latch to suspects' skin or clothes, then emit a five-second charge that causes an uncontrollable contraction of muscle tissue. That gives the officer time to handcuff the suspect.

Thompson said out of the 22 cases, 16 involved suspects under the influence of drugs or alcohol, two cases involved suspects with knives, four cases were assisting JSO and the Jacksonville Beach Police Department and in two cases, two officers used their Tasers on a suspect simultaneously.

"I think it has been very successful," he said. "It has accomplished what we wanted, to protect the officer and the suspects."

But there have been five cases in which the Taser was not effective.

Thompson said in three cases, the probe missed a suspect who was running from police. In one case, the cartridge did not deploy and in another, the suspect was too close.

"Too close can be a problem," he said. "The probes need a certain distance to be effective."

The City Commission approved spending \$28,000 for 30 tasers, holsters, replacement cartridges and accessories. Each taser costs \$499.

The department's success with the non-lethal weapon has prompted the Neptune Beach and Jacksonville Beach police departments to also purchase the stun guns. Neptune Beach will purchase seven Tasers for their officers while Jacksonville Beach already received eight Tasers. Officers from both departments must still be trained in using the Taser before going out on patrol carrying them.

Neptune Beach Police Chief Bill Brandt said he decided on acquiring Tasers after his officers mentioned how effective they were for Atlantic Beach officers.

"They've seen in instances working with Atlantic Beach the value of having a Taser," he said.

Sgt. Bobbi Schlatterer, spokeswoman for the Jacksonville Beach Police Department, said they were interested in the Taser since pepper spray isn't always effective in controlling aggressive suspects.

They researched how other police departments used the devices to make sure they were effective and worthwhile, Schlatterer said.

"It's one more way to maintain control of the situation," she said.

Atlantic Beach is the first police department in Duval County to issue the Tasers to each officer. In Northeast Florida, JSO SWAT teams use the Taser as do the Nassau County and Clay County sheriff's departments.

"We get a lot of questions from other agencies," Thompson said. "Especially policy information and other information about the Taser."

He said every time a Taser is used, it is documented by the department. So far, no one has complained about excessive force from officers using a Taser, Thompson said.

"If the suspects make specific threats or represents a threat to an officer then the officers are justified," he said. "If they take an aggressive stance and there is a clear threat to the officer verbally or physically, then the officer can use the Taser."

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