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Stun-gun decision receives backing

■ MiraCosta vice president takes 50,000 volts to show support for campus police decision to wield new weapon

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OCEANSIDE — A top MiraCosta College administrator put his body on the line Friday to show his support for the campus police's decision to carry stun guns.

Vice President of Student Services Dick Robertson, who pushed to arm campus police with the guns last spring, was stunned and temporarily paralyzed Friday evening with the high-voltage weapon. He was making good on a promise to officers that he would be the first to volunteer to be shot with the gun.

All 10 campus police officers were required to undergo stunning several weeks ago as part of a training program.

"I want them to know I wouldn't wish on them anything I wouldn't do myself," Robertson, 58, said before he was stunned. Robertson's department oversees the campus police force. "This way I will literally be able to say, 'I feel your pain.'"

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JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

MiraCosta College Vice President Dick Robertson is helped by MiraCosta Police Chief Robert Norcross and Officer Kevin Segaua after he was zapped with a stun gun on Friday. Robertson volunteered to be stunned to show his support of the campus police, who began carrying stun guns last month.

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The weapons look and feel similar to handguns

Police started carrying the weapons, which shoot 50,000 volts of electricity and immobilize a person for several seconds, about a month ago, said campus Police Chief Robert Norcross. The squad originally wanted to carry handguns, but the college's board of trustees vetoed the idea after a heated debate and approved the stun guns instead.

The weapons look and feel similar to handguns. To use the gun, an officer points it at and shoots a suspect from up to 21 feet away. When the trigger is pulled, two tiny needle-like probes shoot out. When the probes hit their target, electricity stuns the person

for about 45 seconds — long enough for officers to handcuff him.

Both Norcross and a spokesman for TASER Inc., the company that makes the weapons, said the shock is safe and has no lingering effects, except for a slight burn on the skin where the probes hit.

"It's not fun and it's not a toy ... it's meant to put a violent person on the ground long enough to apprehend him," said company spokesman Steve Tuttle. "But it is safe, and I commend this guy Robertson for being willing to take a little discomfort to show people that."

Campus police Officer Roger Randall said he respects any administrator who would get "down in the trenches" with his troops.

"That's the mark of a good leader," said Randall, who has been on the force about 10 years.

'Jeepers!'

Robertson was stunned

with the gun in front of eight officers and a few spectators — including his wife, Pat — at the campus Police Department on Friday evening.

Standing in khakis, a blue MiraCosta T-shirt, argyle socks and moccasins, Robertson looked more like a goofy grandfather than a hardened criminal. Officers armed him with a rubber knife to make the scenario more realistic.

"Let's get this over with," he said as he handed his wife his glasses. Robertson said he is healthy, with no heart conditions. He had not checked with his physician before the stunning, he said. Tuttle and Norcross said the shock is so small that a person's age and health should not affect their reaction to the stun gun.

Instead of shooting the probes at Robertson, officers attached them to Robertson's shirt and activated the high-voltage TASER. Officers

would normally shock a target for about five seconds; they shocked Robertson for only one second.

It was enough to make Robertson collapse and then moan in pain.

"Jeepers, oh man ... that hurt," he said as officers helped him to his feet. "That definitely would stop me if I was a criminal."

Robertson's reaction was a common one, Tuttle said. People shot with the weapon sometimes stiffen and freeze, others collapse, he said. Some scream, he said.

Less than 10 seconds after the shock, Robertson was on his feet and coherent again.

"That's one of the advantages over batons or pepper spray," Norcross said. "You incapacitate a person without lasting injury. Had I hit him with something to stop him from coming at me, he could have a broken bone."

Campus officers now carry the stun guns, nunchakus, pepper spray and handcuffs. Most officers still would support carrying firearms, Norcross said.

"These aren't a replacement for handguns, but the board has said guns are not an

option," he said. "This is the next best thing."

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