

SPD Special Report

The M26 Taser – Year One Implementation

April 12, 2000 – Seattle Police respond to the call of shots fired in a store parking lot by a shoplift suspect leaving the scene on foot. When officers arrive, they surround the suspect. Though no gun is visible, the suspect is brandishing a knife and is making his way down the sidewalk to a busy intersection. His demeanor is erratic, playful one second, menacing the next. He is totally unresponsive to officer demands to stop and throw down his weapon(s). Pepper spray is deployed with no effect. When the suspect suddenly lunges forward, he is shot and killed by an officer. The suspect is David Walker, a forty-year-old black man with a history of mental illness. Caught on videotape, the incident galvanizes public opinion on two key issues. How are police officers trained and equipped to deal with the mentally ill? What options do patrol officers have to resolve situations, short of the use of lethal force? For many in the community, Mr. Walker's ethnicity also raises the specter of police racism. But while these concerns serve to intensify the controversy surrounding the incident, they do not alter the issues it raises.

In May 2000, the Mayor and City Council asked the Seattle Police Department to consider expanding the availability of less than lethal options for patrol officers. The Department established an internal study group, the Force Options Research Group (FORG), to examine less lethal alternatives and make recommendations of options that might be adopted. A Community Workgroup, convened at the same time, examined less lethal weapons options and made recommendations concerning them from the citizen's perspective.

Both the FORG and the Community Workgroup completed their studies in September 2000, forwarding strikingly similar recommendations to the Mayor and City Council. The proposals of both groups emphasized training, particularly training in dealing with mentally ill persons and those in other types of crises, as well as acquisition of new less lethal devices. The two less lethal devices that were recommended were the M26 Taser and the less lethal shotgun with drag stabilized beanbag rounds.

The Department's report identified the numbers of less lethal devices and the amount and type of training that would be required to ensure that some less lethal option could be available across the City, across all patrol watches, on a 24/7 basis. It was estimated that this goal could be reached over a two-year implementation period that would include acquisition, testing, and training on new less lethal weapons and expansion of crisis intervention skills training for patrol officers. The Mayor and City Council both supported a special funding allocation for the Department's Less Lethal Options Program in the 2001-2002 biennial budget. Seeking to expedite implementation of the Program, the City Council provided some of this funding in late 2000 in the form of an emergency appropriation.

This report focuses on the Department's progress in implementing that portion of the Less Lethal Options Program pertaining to the M26 Taser. It begins with a description of the device and its role in the broader use of force spectrum. Next, the report describes the Department's approach to acquiring, testing, training, and deploying the M26 Taser. Also included is a discussion of the Department's field experience with the device in the first year of implementation. The Report concludes with some reflections on lessons

learned in the first year of the taser portion of the Department's Less Lethal Options Program.

Summary of Key Findings in the Report

- By the end of 2001, the Department met and exceeded its biennial goal of deploying 130 M-26 Tasers by Patrol officers.
- Distribution of tasers is roughly even across all four precincts. Taser use in the first year was slightly more pronounced in the South and West precincts than in the North and East precincts.
- In nearly 60% of incidents, the taser officer was among the first responding officers to the scene.
- Calls involving mentally ill/suicidal subjects and traffic-related incidents are the types of situations in which tasers were most often used.
- Taser subjects were most often males (94%), between the ages of 21-40. About half the subjects were Caucasian and another 42%, African American.
- Nearly 60% of taser subjects were impaired, often severely, by alcohol, drugs, or a mental illness or delusion.
- A quarter of the taser subjects were armed, most often with knives. 62% of the armed subjects were also impaired, usually by mental illness.
- Tasers were used in the dart projectile mode about 60% of the time; in the stun mode, 27% of the time; and both modes were used 12% of the time.
- Verified taser contact was obtained in 86% of the incidents. Where there was verified contact, the taser delivered a disabling or partially disabling effect 95% of the time.
- In 85% of all of the incidents and in 92% of the incidents where contact was verified, the taser was credited with controlling the subject or bringing the situation to a resolution.

- Injuries to subjects subsequent to taser use occurred in 13% of the incidents. 68% of subjects experienced either no injuries or only dart puncture wound abrasions. No subject injuries were major.
- Officers sustained no injuries in 82% of the taser incidents and in only 5% of the incidents were officer injuries sustained after or in conjunction with the taser deployment. There were no major officer injuries in any incident.

The M26 Taser – What is it and what's it for?

Taser characteristics. The M26 Taser is a patented device manufactured by Taser International of Scottsdale, AZ. Looking much like an officer's service weapon, the M26 Taser is laser-sited and uses cartridges attached to the end of the barrel which project a pair of prongs or darts on copper wires over distances from roughly 6 to 21 feet. The device sends 26 watts of electricity at over 50,000 volts over the copper wires, with the effect of overriding a target's motor and sensory systems. Without the cartridge, the M26 Taser can function as a contact stun device. In either mode, the M26 delivers its electrical charge in a five-second cycle (which can be repeated), but once the cycle ends or is broken, the effects immediately disappear.

The FORG report recommended acquisition of the M26 Taser for a variety of reasons. First, with the look and feel so much like a service weapon, the M26 appeared to be a device that would be easy for officers to learn to use proficiently. Second, the M26 provided a safer deployment range for officers (6 to 21 feet) than had been true with earlier tasers, where the range was 6 to 9 feet. This offered the potential for disabling a subject at a standoff range that would provide better safety and protection for officers. Third, the M26 promised the possibility of gaining compliance without resulting injury or lasting effects to the subject or officers. Finally, the M26 was a moderately-priced less lethal option and also had some attractive features relative to administrative review.

Taser purpose and use. The M26 taser is intended to provide officers with a force option to help in overcoming a subject's combative intent, physical resistance, and/or assaultive behavior; in disabling or subduing persons bent on harming themselves or others; or in providing self-defense. As with all applications of force, officers using less lethal options are expected to use necessary and reasonable force to effect a lawful purpose. "Necessary and reasonable" uses are defined by the totality of the circumstances that confront officers.

In no situation is an officer required to use less force than is being threatened by a subject. Moreover, officers are cautioned against the use of a less lethal option, such as a taser, when confronting lethal threats, except when lethal cover is available and in place to provide protection for officers employing these tools as well as for innocent parties.

In its training materials, the Department provides an assessment of less lethal options from a use of force perspective. The M26 Taser, when used as a touch stun device, is viewed as a lesser use of force than OC spray and on a par with pain compliance techniques such as wrist locks and control holds. When used with the dart projectiles, the M26 is viewed as a greater use of force than pain compliance techniques, but a lesser one than punches, kicks, or the use of other impact weapons. Locating less lethal

options on a use of force continuum lets officers know how these devices compare with other uses of force with which they are more familiar. Since such assessments cannot take into account the circumstances faced by officers that may warrant greater or lesser force responses, they remain guidelines and do not substitute for the professional judgment of officers in individual cases. (Attached is the use of force continuum used as a training tool by the Seattle Police Department.)

Several caveats concerning the use of less lethal options were made explicit in the FORG report. These apply particularly to the M26 taser. First, the report noted that the Department was planning a limited deployment of less lethal devices. The practical effect of such a deployment is that there will remain many instances where less lethal options are not available to officers called to respond to specific incidents. As a second caveat, the FORG report indicated that the availability of less lethal options would not necessarily guarantee their use. Rather it was noted that situational dynamics, in particular the timing and volatility of an incident, dictate the response of officers. High-risk, rapidly evolving situations, for example, do not lend themselves to application of a broad range of options, even if some of these options happen to be available. Other factors, such as the amount of time an officer has to react to the threat, the officer's relative proximity to the person posing the threat, the ability to isolate or contain the person posing the threat, can also affect the decision to deploy a less lethal option. And as noted earlier, the capacity to use less lethal options safely is dependent upon the availability of lethal force as protection and backup for the officers involved.

A final caveat identified in the FORG report was that less lethal options should be clearly understood as supplements to – and not substitutes for – deadly force. In this regard, less lethal options do not constitute “first steps” in some progression of responses, nor are officers required to exhaust all less lethal options before resorting to deadly force. Based on the circumstances confronting them, officers may still respond with the lethal options available to them if the situation warrants a deadly force response.

The M26 Taser – Getting Started

Initial Implementation Steps. In order to ensure follow-through on the Department's Less Lethal Options Program, the FORG was charged with program implementation and ongoing study and review, under the auspices of the Deputy Chief of Operations. The emergency appropriation provided by the City Council permitted acquisition of the first installment of 66 M26 Tasers in late 2000. In the last few months of the year, the Department took steps to expedite certification of M-26 taser instructors and development of a training curriculum for the device. SWAT officers visited and consulted with other jurisdictions on their less lethal options training classes and on the operational considerations and guidelines employed in their less lethal programs. Based on the information gathered, a train-the-trainer program for M26 Taser instructors was drafted as was the lesson plan for the four-hour training course for taser officers. Both were reviewed and approved by the Training Section and Command Staff.

A Provisional Order was issued incorporating the M26 Taser into the Department's use of force policy and an interim protocol was established for receipt and check-out of tasers and taser cartridges. In addition, the Department notified Seattle Fire Department that the taser would be deployed and that officers would be calling EMTs to the scene of deployments to check the condition of subjects and to remove taser darts. The city's largest trauma center, Harborview Medical Center, was also contacted to make their personnel aware of the Department's use of tasers, in case some subjects were transported there. These were among a number of recommendations received from other jurisdictions that had previously deployed the taser.

As the first tasers began to be used in the field, FORG members and taser instructors spoke with the officers involved and reviewed each incident to guide future training efforts. During this same period, the FORG developed draft guidelines for receipt and handling of tasers and taser supplies, the selection,

training, and supervision of taser officers, and the documentation of taser deployments. Once this draft was completed and under Department review, the second installment of 64 tasers was ordered (April 2001).

The FORG reviewed the distribution of taser officers across precincts and watches in order to identify where there were gaps in coverage. The Group also continued to review the lessons being learned in the field by taser users. These were incorporated into the lesson plan for the taser training and certification course. Feedback from the field suggested that officer interest in the taser had only increased since the program was initiated. By August 2001, the Department issued a second Directive asking officers to express their interest in receiving less lethal options training and deployment, and identifying areas where additional coverage was needed. The result of this effort was a roster of more than 100 officers seeking less lethal training. In light of this level of interest and after a review of the Less Lethal Options Program budget, the Department decided to acquire a third installment of 64 tasers. These were ordered in September 2001.

Taser Officer Training. As the training course was being developed in the latter part of 2000, the Department began to solicit trainees. Patrol officers interested in being trained and assigned a taser were directed to notify their precinct commanders by December 1st. The names of these officers were then forwarded to Bureau commanders who made recommendations to the Deputy Chief of Operations charged with oversight of the Less Lethal Options Program. Despite the fact that the M26 was a new device, untested by SPD, a number of officers expressed interest in training and deploying it.

By late December 2000, the first training classes were held, resulting in the first group of patrol officers being deployed with the taser before the end of the calendar year. After another series of taser training classes was held in January 2001, the number of officers trained on the taser totaled 66, with 51 of the devices deployed by patrol officers. A number of the initial trainees were not assigned individual tasers. These included Advanced Training and Range officers, who were expected to take over the training program at some point, and SWAT officers, for whom tasers are not individually assigned. Instead, tasers are located in each SWAT vehicle for use by all officers certified to use them.

As noted above, once the tasers began to be used in the field, officers were debriefed by taser instructors to determine whether adjustments should be made to the training program. One issue that surfaced early was the need to educate other officers about the device, how it works, and how a taser officer could best be used in various situations. By March 2001, the Advanced Training Section had developed a lesson plan and incorporated a segment on taser tactics into the Officer Street Skills class for all officers and sergeants. A two-hour class focused on less lethal options was developed for supervisors and the course for taser officers was also revised to include more tactics training. The taser training course that emerged combines classroom instruction (including a written test), drills and qualifications, and scenario-based training.

A second round of taser training and certification classes was scheduled in November 2001. When these classes were completed, the Department had not only reached but exceeded its goal of training and deploying 130 tasers in the ranks of first-response patrol officers.

Taser distribution. The Department has been very deliberate in its deployment of the M26 taser. Implementation has progressed in stages to ensure that training efforts would be refreshed by field experience and that the Department would continue to build on its base of knowledge and expertise. From the beginning, the priority has been to provide officers involved in first level response with a less lethal alternative. However, as confidence in and experience with the taser grew, others in the Department began to express interest in deploying with the device. Part of the decision to acquire a third installment of the tasers was to explore and support its deployment among such units.

The initial installment of 66 tasers was issued to officers who went through the first set of training courses. Fifty-one of the devices were distributed to officers working the street, eight were assigned to SWAT vehicles, five were used as trades or swap-outs because of malfunction or damage in training or initial use, and two were retained in Evidence for future trades in the event of any field problems. By the time of the second round of training classes, the Department had received the second and third taser installments. It had also received requests for training and certification from a number of specialty unit personnel and had developed guidelines to cover taser deployment by these units.

After the second round of taser training classes, the Department had issued a total of 158 tasers. Of these, 136 are deployed in patrol units, 14 in specialty units (including gangs, DUI, K-9, CIT), and 8 in SWAT vehicles. Another 20-25 officers have been trained and certified on the taser but have not been issued a device. These include training instructors and supervisory personnel. Among the four precincts, tasers are distributed as follows:

- West Precinct 45 tasers, including four in the ACT teams
- North Precinct 35 tasers, including four in the ACT teams
- South Precinct 31 tasers, including two in the ACT team
- East Precinct 25 tasers, including two in the ACT team

After retaining a few tasers in Evidence for trades or swap-outs, the Department now has about thirty more to distribute. Once again, the FORG is looking at coverage gaps in patrol units and evaluating the experience of specialty units in making recommendations for further taser deployments.

Operational Issues. In this first year of implementation, the Department has found that several operational issues are significant in ensuring the performance and reliability of the M-26 Taser. First, other officers on the scene of a taser application need to be aware of how it performs. In particular, officers need to know that a taser “hit” only lasts for a five second cycle unless reapplied, so it is important to move quickly to restrain a subject. Also, it is possible for the taser effect to transfer to someone touching the subject, including a police officer. Taser officers need to make their peers aware when they plan to deploy the device so that officers can avoid being affected by it.

A second issue pertains to the taser’s power source, the batteries that are crucial to its performance. These must be checked regularly to ensure that the device will deliver a full charge when applied. It is recommended that officers “spark” their tasers at the beginning of each shift to determine if the battery is working and at full strength. Battery use was much higher in the first year than anticipated. In the second year, the Department will be shifting to a rechargeable battery that is more expensive initially, but will be cheaper and more reliable in the long run.

A final operational issue concerns the officer’s ability to make “real time” assessment of the taser’s effects and respond accordingly. Proficiency in making such assessments comes with time and experience in using the device and as officers have used the taser more, they have gained considerable expertise. Field experience has taught that in general (there are exceptions) to obtain the full effect of the device, both darts must hit the subject, the copper wires cannot be damaged or dislodged, and heavy clothes, if not completely penetrated, must be near the subject’s body. When these conditions are not met, the expected results may not be obtained. This means taser officers may need to reapply the device either with a new cartridge or in the stun mode. Field conditions may not always make reapplication possible, but as the year progressed, officers demonstrated the confidence and capacity to reassess the situations they were confronting and redeploy their tasers as necessary.

The M26 Taser – Year 1 Field Experience

The following discussion is a review of incidents in which tasers were deployed by SPD officers from January 1, 2001 through January 31, 2002. A total of 106 incidents are described and discussed. (Two incidents where tasers were used at some point, but which resulted in fatal shootings of subjects by police officers, are not included in this discussion. This is because these incidents are still under Department review and investigation.)

When and Where Tasers were Used. Even though there was to be a limited deployment of the M26 taser, the overall strategy was to provide some coverage across the city on a 24x7 basis. Table A reflects actual taser uses distributed among three daily time periods. As can be seen in Table A, taser deployments were heaviest in the late afternoon to midnight time period.

Table A - Taser Use by Time of Day

SPD, Jan 2001 – Jan 2002, N = 106

Time Period	Number of Deployments	Percent of Deployments
0800 – 1600 hours	21	20%
1600 – 2400 hours	55	52%
2400 – 0800 hours	30	28%

When taser incidents are charted by precinct, the South and West Precincts portray a more dominant use of the device than do the North and East Precincts. Table B shows the distribution of taser incidents by Precinct.

Table B – Taser Use Incidents by Precinct

SPD, Jan 2001 – Jan 2002, N = 106

Precinct	Number of Incidents	Percent of Incidents
West Precinct	32	30%
North Precinct	19	18%
South Precinct	34	32%
East Precinct	20	19%
Other/out of city	1	1%

Taser use does not exactly reflect taser distribution across the city, as measured by the proportion of tasers in each precinct. These relationships are shown in Table C where the proportions of tasers issued

and incidents recorded in each precinct are shown. As can be seen, South Precinct had the most taser use incidents even though the Precinct is third among the four precincts for the number of tasers issued. West Precinct, which has the largest number of issued tasers, had the next largest number of uses. North Precinct, on the other hand, while deployed with 26% of the patrol taser officers, has recorded 18% of the uses. The East Precinct has recorded a level of usage of the taser that is consonant with their proportionate availability among officers.

Table C – Proportions of Tasers Issued and Taser Uses by Precinct

SPD, Jan 2001 – Jan 2002

Precinct	Percent of Issued Tasers	Percent of Taser Uses
West Precinct	33%	30%
North Precinct	26%	18%
South Precinct	23%	32%
East Precinct	18%	19%

Closely related to the issue of geographic distribution and coverage is the availability of taser officers. This is especially significant in light of the fact that the tasers are in limited deployment across the city. To examine this issue, taser incidents were classified according to how often the taser officer was part of the first response, part of a back-up unit, or specifically requested by officers at the scene. Table D presents this information. As can be seen, taser officers were frequently among the officers first responding to an incident.

Table D – Incidents by Taser Officer as First Response, Back-up or Request

SPD, Jan 2001 – Jan 2002, N = 106

Taser Officer Involvement in Incident	Number of Incidents	Percent of Incidents
Officer in first response	59	56%
Officer in back-up unit	38	36%
Officer specifically requested	9	8%

Types of Incidents Where Tasers Were Used. Table E presents the types of incidents in which officers used their tasers. In classifying these events, the original type of call/incident to which officers responded has been used, even though the situation may have developed into something else. For example, officers may have initiated a traffic stop for reckless driving. Since this was the initiating event, the incident would

be classified as “traffic-related,” even if the vehicle turned out to be stolen or drugs were seized and arrests made for these crimes.

Table E – Types of Incidents Where Tasers Were Used

SPD, Jan 2001 – Jan 2002, N = 106

Type of Incident	Number of Incidents	Percent of Incidents
Drug or Alcohol Related	17	16%
Fight/Disturbance Call	17	16%
Mental Illness/Suicide	21	19%
Traffic Related	20	19%
Violent Crime	14	13%
Other	17	16%

As Table E indicates, situations involving mentally ill/suicidal persons and traffic-related events comprise the largest categories of incidents where tasers were employed. This reflects a primary interest of the Department’s Less Lethal Options Program, which is to provide alternative tools to officers who are regularly called upon to deal with persons in crisis, either because of a mental illness or because of drug or alcohol impairments, a frequent component of traffic stops. A few examples of these types of taser incidents will illustrate the challenges faced by officers.

Mental/Suicide Incident #1 - officers were called to the scene of a man jumping in front of cars in an apparently effort to be hit. As officers approached, the man kept walking away and reaching into his waistband as if going for a weapon. He also crouched behind planters on the street as if retrieving something. Officers drew their service weapons and ordered him to stop and put hands where they could be seen. One officer called for a taser unit. When it arrived, officers again ordered the man to raise his hands. Instead he put them in his waistband and withdrew his hand pointing it like a pistol at officers. At this point the taser was applied, striking the man and immobilizing him. He was taken to HMC for mental evaluation. It was learned later that the man had been released earlier in the day from the jail mental ward and had tried to reenter it.

Mental/Suicide Incident #2 - officers were called to an apartment by a mental health case worker who was concerned about a client who had threatened suicide by slitting her wrists or jumping from the balcony of her 4th floor apartment. A CIT trained officer was the first to respond, followed by back-up units including a taser officer. Officers obtained the universal key from the apartment manager and the CIT officer attempted to contact the woman, who by now had barricaded herself in the apartment. As the door was opened and forced against the furniture holding it, officers saw the subject bolt for the balcony. Forcing themselves inside, the CIT officer ran and tackled the woman as she reached the balcony and the taser officer used the stun mode of the taser to pacify her enough to be removed from the danger zone of the balcony. She continued to fight and struggle even when in restraints for transport to HMC for mental health evaluation.

Mental/Suicide Incident #3 – officers responded to a call about a male mentally ill person screaming and yelling at fellow apartment tenants. The apartment manager indicated the subject was on the 9th floor. Officers took the elevator to the 8th floor and used the stairway to the 9th floor. On entering the hallway, they observed the subject staring at the elevator, waiting for it to open with a fixed blade knife in hand. The subject turned toward the officers who told him to drop the weapon. Instead he advanced toward them from about 15 feet away. While his partner provided lethal cover, the other officer used his taser, hitting the subject in the shoulder and hip. This disabled the subject so he could be placed in custody. While awaiting SFD transport, the subject again became agitated and belligerent so a second taser cycle was applied. The subject was transported to HMC for mental evaluation.

Traffic-related Incident #1 – In the first taser use in 2001, officers responded to a two-car, hit-and-run, injury accident. The officer who spotted the vehicle leaving the scene was able to stop it, but the intoxicated driver was extremely belligerent and non-compliant. A taser officer arrived as a back-up unit and applied the taser as it became clear that the subject was becoming more and more uncontrolled with each attempt to gain his compliance. The tasers struck the subject in his arm, but it took three cycles of the taser to place the driver under arrest.

Traffic-related Incident #2 - officers attempted to stop a car for reckless driving, when it sped away. While following, officers learned that the car was stolen. The driver stopped abruptly and fled on foot, with officers also in foot pursuit. Once the subject was contained in a fenced area, officers attempted to get him to surrender, without success. Instead the subject turned and ran toward officers refusing to show his hands. One of the officers, who was equipped with a taser, applied it. The subject continued to be uncooperative as officers attempted to handcuff him, so a second cycle of the taser was used. After that, the subject was arrested without further incident.

The next three categories – drug/alcohol, fight/disturbance, and violent crime incidents – were roughly equal in number. These tended to follow a predictable pattern in which officer attempts to stop a suspect involved in a drug sale, or to intervene in a disturbance, or arrest on a warrant, resulted in either flight by the suspect, aggression toward the officers, or both. Once confronted by officers, typically after a pursuit, the suspect resisted officer commands, often violently. This was followed by repeated attempts to gain suspect compliance and finally to bring him/her under control. The taser often proved to be the most effective of the control measures employed. A few examples follow.

Violent Crime Incident - officers attempted to arrest a subject on a felony rape warrant. During a foot chase, the subject drew a spring-loaded knife from his clothing so violently that it was projected from his hand. During the pursuit, the taser was applied, hitting the subject as he was running. It brought him to the ground, but he still resisted as he was being arrested. After he was subdued, a second knife was recovered.

Fight/Disturbance Incident - officers responded to a call about a fight. On arrival, two large subjects were observed to be brawling, surrounded by a large group of on-lookers. As the two officers attempted to intervene, one subject pushed away from officers, took a fighting stance with balled fists, shouted obscenities, and stepped toward officers. The crowd also started to react toward the officers. One of the officers had a taser and deployed it on the subject at the very moment that the other combatant reached around to restrain him from assaulting the officers. Each of the taser prongs hit one of the subjects, one in a finger and one in the back. Because their arms were wrapped together, both subjects were affected. After they were taken into custody, it was evident that both were very intoxicated. Once things calmed down, the more aggressive of the subjects agreed that officers had done the right thing. The other subject was released to a family member.

“Other” Category Incident - The “other” category of taser events was generally comprised of property

crimes, on-view loitering or harassment incidents, probation or warrant violation cases. An example of this type of incident involved a “send police” call to 911, made by a woman caller who indicated that someone was trying to break into her home. Upon arrival, the officers observed the suspect attempting to restrain a woman on a couch. She was screaming for help. The officers entered and told the subject to get on the floor, he complied but kept trying to reach under the couch for something. Thinking the subject was trying to reach for a weapon, the taser was applied. He became compliant and was taken into custody. He was booked for a domestic violence-related burglary. The woman was his estranged wife.

Characteristics of Taser Subjects. Taser incidents were reviewed to determine the gender, age, and race of subjects on whom tasers were used. As might be predicted, males significantly outnumber females as taser subjects, with males comprising 94% of subjects. The age distribution of taser subjects is close to a bell curve, with just over two-thirds of the subjects between the ages of 21 and 40, and the balance split almost evenly between the 20 and under age group and the over 40 age group. Table F presents the distribution of taser subjects by age category. Taser incidents were also classified by the race of the subject on whom the taser was used. These data are presented in Table G. As can be seen, about half of the taser subjects were Caucasians, with African Americans comprising the next largest group.

Table F – Age Distribution of Taser Subjects

SPD, Jan 2001 – Jan 2002, N = 106

Age Category	Number of Subjects	Percent of Subjects
20 years old and younger	16	15%
21-25 years old	20	19%
26-30 years old	17	16%
31-35 years old	15	14%
36-40 years old	19	18%
Over 40 years of age	19	18%

Table G – Distribution of Taser Subjects by Race

SPD, Jan 2001 – Jan 2002, N =106

Race of Taser Subject	Number of Subjects	Percent of Subjects
African American	44	42%
Asian/Pacific Islander	6	6%
Caucasian	52	49%
Other	4	4%

Taser incidents were also reviewed and classified according to the degree and type of impairment that subjects exhibited to officers. Nearly sixty percent of the incidents involved subjects that were impaired to one degree or another, often seriously. Table H presents information on the number of incidents and types of impairments shown by subjects. As indicated, persons suffering from delusions or mental illness comprised the largest group of impaired persons confronted by officers. Impairment resulting from substance abuse of all types was apparent in 36% of the incidents.

It should be noted that the group of cases involving mental impairments is larger than the number of incidents classified as mental illness/suicide cases. This is because a number of these incidents began as calls to disturbances or assaults, for example, and were so classified. When the mental illness incident category is merged with those impaired by mental illness, nearly a fourth of the taser incidents involved a mental health component. This underscores the Department's assessment of the need to continue to emphasize crisis intervention training for all officers, another component of SPD's Less Lethal Options Program.

Table H – Numbers and Types of Impairment by Taser Subjects

SPD, Jan 2001 – Jan 2002, N = 106

Taser Subject Impairment	Number of Subjects	Percent of Subjects
Alcohol impaired	24	22%
Chemical/drug impaired	11	10%
Drug & alcohol impaired	4	4%
Mental illness/delusional	24	22%
No apparent impairment	43	41%

A notable characteristic of taser subjects was the degree to which they were armed. A quarter of taser subjects were armed, most often with knives (in 11 of the 26 cases). Subjects armed with guns comprised 15% of the armed subjects. Sixty-two percent of the armed subjects were impaired, with the most frequent impairment being mental illness/delusions. Ten of the sixteen cases of armed and impaired subjects involved the mentally ill. What is surprising about the number of taser incidents involving armed subjects is the fact that officers so often chose to use a less lethal option when confronting armed subjects, and in many cases, what turned out to be armed assailants.

How Tasers Were Used and the Results Obtained. In about 60% of the taser incidents, the dart projectile mode of the M26 Taser was used. The stun mode of the device was used 27% of the time; and both systems were used in just under 12% of cases. Use of the dual system modes occurred when subjects became newly resistant after having been subdued, or when the dart projectiles failed to reach the subject or became dislodged during a struggle.

Taser Performance. Because of the varied circumstances and conditions in which tasers were used, the Department captured performance data in three ways. First, each taser incident was reviewed to see if there had been a verified contact of the subject with the taser. Often, a taser might be described by

observing officers as “not working”, but the taser officer indicated that the prongs had not reached the subject, or only one had hit the mark, or extra layers of clothing had prevented the darts from making contact. Of the 106 cases studied, verified taser contact was confirmed in 91 cases or 86% of the time.

Next, the Department looked at the effect of the taser when contact was made. Among the cases where they had been verified contact, 95% reported either a disabling, or partially disabling, effect on the subject. Finally, the Department reviewed taser deployments to see whether the device either brought the subject under control or led to the resolution of the incident. In 85% of all taser incidents, the device was credited with helping to resolve the situation. In incidents where there was verified contact with the taser, the rate of success was 92% in controlling the subject or bringing the situation to resolution.

Subject and Officer Injury. Taser incidents were also reviewed to determine the extent of subject and officer injuries that occurred when tasers were used. National studies have consistently found that uses of force are more likely during officer interactions with persons who are mentally ill or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. They have also found that uses of force often result in injuries to both officers and subjects. These studies have placed the rate of officer injuries at 10% in general use of force situations and as high as 30-40% in incidents involving the mentally ill and impaired subjects. Injuries to subject occur nationally at a rate of 38% in use of force incidents, although few of these injuries are serious. [See Kenneth Adams, “What We Know About Police Use of Force,” and Mark A. Henriquez, “IACP National Database Project on Police Use of Force,” in *Use of Force by Police, Overview of National and Local Data*, Washington, DC: NIJ, October 1999.]

In light of these statistics, the reported injury rate for both officers and subjects in the taser incidents studied was low. In more than two-thirds of the incidents (68%), subjects sustained either no injury or only puncture abrasions from the taser darts. Injuries subsequent to the taser deployment were reported in 13% of incidents. Generally, these injuries occurred as subjects fell to the ground after having been “hit” with taser darts. In 19% of the incidents, subject injuries occurred prior to police arrival, prior to taser deployment, or were self-inflicted. No subject injuries were major, and there were no injuries attributed directly to the taser itself.

There were no officer injuries in 82% of the incidents studied. In 13% of the incidents, officers sustained injuries prior to the taser being applied. In only 5% of the incidents were there officer injuries after taser deployment or directly related to its use. In all cases, the injuries to officers were minor. Because of the high proportion of taser subjects who were impaired, these relatively low rates of reported officer injuries are very encouraging. This helps to meet another key objective of the Department’s Less Lethal Options Program, which is to provide options that officers can deploy safely.

Lessons from Year One of Taser Implementation

With the benefit of just over a year of operational experience with the M-26 Taser, it is useful to reflect on the lessons the Department has learned. Four particular insights are important to note.

1. The taser was a good choice. While the M-26 had a lot to recommend it when less lethal options were first evaluated, the Department could predict neither the level of officer acceptance it would receive, nor its applicability to the situations routinely faced by officers. Also unknown was the degree to which the taser would prove useful in the types of incidents the Less Lethal Options Program was designed to address. On all these scores, the taser appears to have been the right choice. Officer acceptance has been high and taser officers have clearly incorporated the device into their daily response routines. In addition, the number of reported taser incidents involving mentally ill and otherwise impaired persons suggests that the device is providing an alternative in

the types of situations envisioned by the Less Lethal Options Program. Finally, in light of the low rate of injury reported in taser incidents, the device has proven to be a less lethal option that officers can use to defuse situations safely, while offering minimal risk to subjects.

2. Phased deployment of the taser was the right decision. It would have been tempting to deploy all of the tasers as soon as possible, if only to be able to say it was done. Instead, the Department was deliberate and measured in its deployment, heeding the admonition of other agencies not to deploy beyond true training capacity. Since the Department was very much in a “learn-as-you-go” mode, it was imperative to monitor taser uses carefully and to ensure that field experience was used to inform and refresh training efforts. The phased approach also helped the Department ensure that its 24x7 and citywide coverage objectives were being achieved.
3. Expectations of the taser must be adjusted to fit with reality. Because the taser has shown itself beneficial in a variety of incidents, there is a tendency (both internally and externally) to view it as a panacea. This is far from the truth. To begin with, the device has some very real operational limitations that must be understood and appreciated. To work best, the taser should be fully charged, both darts should make contact, and the wires should remain intact. Absent all these conditions, the desired effect may not be obtained. Moreover, deploying the taser on highly impaired subjects may not offer the best opportunity to achieve optimal operational conditions. In addition, while the M-26 provides greater standoff distance for officers than did earlier tasers, the 6-21 foot range of the device is still perilously close, especially when confronting persons who are armed. In this regard, the number of armed subjects on whom officers used the taser this first year, should be viewed perhaps as a cautionary tale and one to be carefully watched.

For the public’s part, the reality is that the taser does not spell the end of police shootings. Instead, officers will still need to employ lethal force when situations so warrant. For officers’ part, the reality is that while the taser does some things really well, it is not the answer in all cases. There are some uses for which the taser is simply inappropriate; and it cannot overcome its inherent limitations in field applications. Ongoing monitoring and tracking of field uses will continue to be the best way to ensure that taser officers and their peers are kept apprised of what works and what doesn’t.

4. The holes in the “safety net” grow wider. A review of the first year’s taser incidents suggests that the explicit goal to provide first responding officers with alternatives to deadly force when dealing with persons in crisis has been met. That same review, however, serves to illustrate just how difficult and problematic these circumstances are. Among the sample of taser incidents studied were those where officers were called to deal with people completely out of control and without any means of support. Others involved providing assistance to mental health professionals and other caregivers being abused or assaulted by those they were trying to assist. In still others, officers were asked to confront desperate or despondent persons for whom all other help had fallen short.

Clearly, the “safety net” for the mentally ill, and for those ravaged by substance abuse, is badly frayed. Even those who are receiving services appear to need more or different assistance than the system can provide; and with the current pressures on public sector budgets at all levels, it is likely

that the situation will continue to deteriorate. This will place more and more officers into confrontations with persons whose judgments and actions are wildly unpredictable and who, more often than not, appear to represent armed threats. Though such persons may be more irrational than intentional, their erratic behaviors pose dangers to officers and to the public that are nearly impossible to assess accurately and counter successfully. That officers have been able to do so under many circumstances in the past, does not mean that they will continue to prevail, no matter what options they have at their disposal.