

TASER® Electronic Control Device (ECD) Training Exposures: What are the Benefits?

The question of whether or not officers should be required or even given the option of being exposed to the effects of the TASER ECD is not a new one. It has been the subject of past articles and this question comes up in just about every TASER training course. But when the discussion came up during a presentation on electronic control devices during the 2006 IACP conference in Boston, the panel members and several members of the audience seemed to have a myopic view of why exposures are done and what value they had, if any. The gist of the argument against exposures was that “everyone already knows they work, so what’s the point?” However, in order for trainers and administrators to make informed decisions and, more importantly, for the benefit of the officers who will carry these devices in the field, it is important to review all the reasons why exposures should be considered.

“I don’t need to be shot with a gun or hit by a baton to know how they work.”

The most commonly assumed reason for exposing officers to the TASER ECD is that it is done to prove to the officer that the device is effective. This may have been true in the past, but the fact is that the ADVANCED TASER M26 and TASER X26 -- the new generation of electronic control devices that cause neuro-muscular incapacitation and not only pain -- have been around since 1999 and 2003 respectively over 225,000 officers and suspects have taken the exposure. It would seem to be a reasonable assumption that most officers are now willing to accept that the devices are effective. However, for those few skeptics that are still out there, an exposure can accomplish in five seconds what hours of explanation could not achieve. But this is only one of several reasons why training exposures have value and certainly not the most important reason for voluntary exposures.

“The justification for exposure to pepper spray in training does not apply to a TASER.”

This is absolutely true. Pepper spray exposure is typically justified because of the likelihood of unintentional exposure in the field, and to show the officer that they can fight through the effects of the chemical agent. Since the odds of an unintentional exposure to a TASER device are pretty slim, and the ability to fight through the effects of the TASER cycle is very unlikely, some have argued that exposure to a TASER device is therefore not justified. If the purpose of exposure to a TASER device in training was to show an officer they could fight through it if accidentally exposed, this argument would be valid. However, of the several reasons I know of for conducting training exposures, this is not one of them. This argument is not really valid because it is comparing apples and oranges. The reasons for considering exposure to a TASER ECD in training, as listed on the following pages, are completely different from the reasons used to justify OC exposure.

Credibility

There is also the issue of credibility, not only in the department, but also in the community and in court. An instructor is much more convincing and has more credibility with students if the instructor has taken the exposure, particularly if the instructor will also expose the students.

Many officers, instructors, chiefs and sheriffs have taken the exposure on live television, in front of city councils and before community groups. This goes a long way toward demonstrating the

general safety of the devices and the department's commitment toward using them as a non-lethal force option to reduce both officer and suspect injuries.

When an officer is justifying her use of force, she will be able to do so more easily if she can explain that she knew exactly what effect the TASER device had on the subject and why it was reasonably necessary. Additionally, if an officer is ever in a position to have to defend himself against a subject who is armed with an electronic weapon, he will be in a much better position to justify his use of force if he can explain that he knew from experience what effect that weapon would have had on him and his ability to protect himself. It has been argued that this reasoning can be used to justify exposure to all less-lethal force options, including impact weapons such as batons, flashlights, fists, feet and launchable munitions. Although this type of exposure might in fact bolster an officer's credibility, the likelihood of a significant injury, permanent or temporary, is much higher with these tools than with an ECD. I would argue that the benefits would not justify the risk.

Training retention. The human mind thinks in pictures. Explaining a tactic or a procedure is a necessary first step, but it can only get you so far. Live demonstrations and opportunities for students to go hands on and practice are the most effective ways for them to learn new techniques and retain that information.

Tactics. When properly done by a well educated and dedicated trainer, every exposure conducted during a training course will be of value to every student in that class. In a class of 40 students, the instructor can demonstrate 40 different situations that every student in that class can learn from since people will have various reactions to a TASER ECD exposure. Situations such as the different effects based on probe spreads and strikes to different parts of the body, follow up tactics for one-probe hits and complete misses and the difference in effects between probe deployment and a drive stun. This is perhaps one of the most important reasons for voluntary exposures. They can provide an invaluable acceleration of the learning curve of what can happen in the field based upon the myriad of different reactions that can occur with variations of the probes locations on the body.

Minimizing multiple cycles. One of the concerns surrounding use of TASER devices in the field is the use of multiple cycles. There are many circumstances that can justify using more than one cycle and there is no known scientific reason to prohibit officers from using multiple cycles when necessary. Still, using multiple cycles (or multiple baton strikes, multiple gun shots, multiple impact rounds, etc.), whether justified or not, can lead to allegations of excessive force, particularly if there are several officers on scene at the time.

This becomes even more of an issue in those rare and unfortunate incidences when a suspect suddenly dies in custody. One way to minimize the number of cycles used is to train officers to get control of the suspect and restrain him during the TASER cycle. This is easier said than done. Because of a pervasive human fear of electricity, even officers who have been told that it is safe to touch a suspect during the TASER cycle are often reluctant to do so. Since the suspect is only incapacitated during the cycle, this failure to go hands on can lead to the application of additional cycles if the suspect continues to resist once the cycle ends.

One effective way to address this in training is to have two students holding or “spotting” another student during the training exposure. They will then see and feel firsthand that they will not be affected by the TASER cycle and they can follow through by placing the exposed student in control holds and ultimately in handcuffs during the cycle. This not only convinces the students that they need not fear being “shocked,” it also creates that picture in their mind of controlling and handcuffing during the cycle.

Probe removal. For agencies that allow officers to remove probes, training exposures utilizing probe discharges allow the instructor to demonstrate proper probe removal techniques and give the students an opportunity to practice.

Training injuries. There have been injuries reported to have occurred during TASER training. Most are very minor in nature and have nothing to do with the electrical output of the devices. Put into context, with the hundreds of thousands of training exposures that have occurred, reported injuries (whether legitimate or not) account for only a small fraction of one percent of the total. Compare that to your injury rate in the police academy, during defensive tactics training, tactical (SWAT) training or any physical performance tests your department does. Effective training in the use of force often includes physical activity and carries with it some risk of injury. Each student must be fully informed of all known risks and must make an informed consent prior to any training exposure. Proper safety protocols have gone a long way to reducing these risks.

The purpose of this article is not to try to convince law enforcement policy makers or trainers to require exposure to TASER devices during training. TASER International does not require a TASER exposure as a condition for user or instructor certification and it is up to each agency to make this determination. It is simply to remind them that there are several issues to consider, beyond just convincing officers that the devices work, when determining if exposure should be voluntary, required or prohibited. Are exposures necessary for effective training and success in the field? Perhaps. Is there value to each officer, the department and the community in conducting exposures during training? Absolutely.

About the Author

Rick Guilbault retired from the Sacramento Police Department at the rank of sergeant after 24 years of service. His assignments included Field Training Officer, SWAT Team Operator, Patrol Sergeant, Academy Commander, In-Service Training Supervisor, Administrative Sergeant, and SWAT Team Leader. He is a certified instructor in use of force, chemical agents, firearms, crowd control, and a variety of less-lethal weapons. Rick designed the original TASER training program for Sacramento PD when they became the first large agency to fully deploy the M26 on every patrol officer and supervisor. He also assisted with policy development and designed tactics for deployment of ECDs in crowd control and tactical situations.

Rick has assisted several state law enforcement standards and training committees in establishing statewide standards for electronic control device training.

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