

Cops need alternative to Tasers

By Martin A. Greenberg

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The [New York Civil Liberties Union](#) recently issued a 40-page report, "Taking Tasers Seriously: The Need for Better Regulation of Stun Guns in New York." Unfortunately, the report failed to mention how community policing and police volunteers might help decrease the need to resort to Tasers.

In some Capital Region communities and elsewhere in New York, there are volunteer auxiliary police. Since long before the introduction of the community policing strategy, citizens have had the opportunity of volunteering to assist regular police in making their communities a safer place to live. Use of such volunteer police in New York City predates U.S. involvement in World War I.

The NYCLU report analyzed 851 Taser incident reports from eight police departments, including Albany and Guilderland. The report also looked at 10 departments' policies and guidelines for using the weapons, which deliver up to 50,000 volts of electricity.

A federal appeals court in California in 1995 cited the testimony of a law enforcement officer who compared a Taser shock to "being hit on the back with a four-by-four by [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#)." Taser weapons have contributed to the deaths of more than a dozen New Yorkers in recent years.

The NYCLU analysis found that "nearly 60 percent of reported Taser incidents did not meet expert recommended criteria for justifying Taser use. ... Forty percent of the Taser incidents analyzed involved at-risk subjects, such as children, the elderly, the visibly infirm and individuals who are seriously intoxicated or mentally ill."

Consequently, the NYCLU recommends that New York police agencies comply with nationally recognized expert guidelines, such as those created by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Police Executive Research Forum, for their training programs. The state also should recognize the urgent need to undertake actions to achieve and coordinate the universal adoption of these expert guidelines.

Although the report stated that "people of color are overwhelmingly represented in Taser incidents," the health and welfare of all individuals are in jeopardy until the recommendations contained in the report are followed.

Here's where auxiliary police officers can help.

These unpaid, uniformed volunteers are trained to perform many of the noncriminal-related functions of police officers. If carefully selected and trained according to local police department standards and policies, they can do much to prevent incidents of domestic abuse, public intoxication, gang violence and other types of disorder. Most importantly, they can reduce to the need for regular police intervention and their use of force.

Local police agencies could take a giant stride toward fulfilling our societal aspirations by not only supporting the NYCLU's recommendations regarding the use of Taser weapons, but also by making the profound and difficult changes needed for the true implementation of the "community policing" initiative.

Community policing is aimed at building a culture within the police department and the community it serves, based on the values of interaction and respect. It is a strategy that combines community input, scientific crime analysis and cooperative problem solving.

The use of trained and qualified auxiliary police officers represents a primary example of such cooperative problem-solving and is, perhaps, the highest form of community policing and citizen involvement in public safety.

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