



Portland Chief Mike Reese defends use of force, says officers responding to twice as many suicide calls

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Portland Police Chief Mike Reese defends his bureau's record in coping with increasing number of suicidal subjects.

Portland Police Chief Mike Reese this morning went on the offensive, defending his officers' use of force as he presented a report to a downtown public safety group about the increasing number of suicidal calls to police in the city.

"We're trying to do good in a very broken system," Reese said, speaking in the Rose Room of City Hall.

The chief and Sgt. Greg Stewart pointed out the city police are responding to nearly double the number of calls involving either someone who is attempting suicide, threatening suicide or has completed suicide since 2001.

In 2011, police took 1200 such calls, compared with 630 in 2001, the bureau's report said. In 2011, police took 1100 people into protective custody. The actual number of suicides in Multnomah County between 2001 and 2009 did not rise as dramatically - 111 in 2009, compared with 83 in 2001.

"When officers get there quickly, we save a lot of lives," Reese said.

The chief also presented bar graphs that show a decline in police use of force between 2008 and 2011. In 2011, the bureau data show police used force in less than 0.3 percent of all contacts and less than 4 percent of all arrests.

"One of the things we've done very well over the last few years is manage force," Reese said.

Reese's and the bureau's presentation comes as a Multnomah County grand jury is reviewing the **latest fatal shooting by police of Brad Lee Morgan**, a 21-year-old man who was located atop a downtown parking garage after he had called 9-1-1 and threatened to jump. Police said a sergeant and officer fired multiple shots after Morgan pulled out what turned out to be a fake black handgun. Morgan died from a single gunshot to the head.

It also follows **the city's \$1.2 million settlement of a federal wrongful death lawsuit filed by the family of Aaron Campbell**, an unarmed African American man who was fatally shot in the back by police in Jan. 29, 2010. Campbell was described as suicidal and distraught over his brother's death that day. The family's attorney pointed out a "disconnect" between the chief's findings that the shooting violated policy, and 11 training officers who were ready to testify that Officer Ronald Frashour acted as trained.

Two assistant Oregon U.S. attorneys who are working with federal Justice Department officials attended the meeting. Since June, the federal authorities have been examining if the police bureau engages in a pattern of excessive force, particularly when dealing with people in a mental health crisis.

The presentation echoed a similar address Reese gave to the same group - the Downtown Public Safety Action Committee - in March, following an unusual spate of police officer-involved shootings between Jan. 1, 2010 and Jan. 2, 2011. During that time, police shot 8 men.

This morning, Reese, crime analyst Stewart, and Leisbeth Gerritsen, the bureau's civilian mental health professional who coordinates the bureau's crisis intervention training, highlighted the faltering safety net for people suffering from mental illness -- from the closure of the 24-hour Crisis Triage Center, the lack of care for the uninsured and an inadequate involuntary commitment process.

If there isn't a system of care in place to catch people suffering a mental health crisis, it's no surprise that they're going to have multiple contacts with police, Gerritsen said.

Derald Walker, chief executive officer of Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare, said the Bazelon Institute for Mental Health Law is continuing to examine how to provide better care for people with mental illness to reduce their contacts with law enforcement.

"The problem is with the system that fails to provide the supportive preventive services," Walker said.

When asked what the best national model is on how law enforcement should approach someone who is suicidal and armed, there were few answers.

The chief reiterated his support for crisis intervention training for all officers, calling it a "core competency every officer needs to have." Reese also said he continued to support the bureau's use of its single mobile crisis unit that focuses on people with frequent police contacts and officers' ongoing relationships with social service providers.

Walker said the best way to approach someone who is suicidal is to take your time, be empathetic and supportive, and help the person solve their problems and recognize there are other options than taking their life. But he said that when someone is suicidal and under the influence of alcohol or drugs, it's a "highly unpredictable situation."

Reese also told the group that the bureau is in the process of putting in a place a new policy that requires sergeants to immediately respond to scenes where officers use force and begin investigations. This was a policy that the federal Department of Justice had recommended, Reese has said.

What the chief did not share is that the new policy is on hold as the Portland Police Association, the union that represents sergeants, has filed a grievance, arguing that such new duties for sergeants need to be negotiated.

The chief said the bureau has placed a "new inspector" in its Professional Services Division to primarily analyze all officer use of force data within the bureau after federal justice officials identified that gap in the bureau.

"They pointed out to us we don't have one single person tracking all use of force," Reese said.

-- **Maxine Bernstein**

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