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Probation department doubles number of armed officers

By: SARAH WILKINS - Staff Writer

Initiative will make officers safer, authorities say

SAN DIEGO COUNTY -- The San Diego county probation department is doubling the number of probation officers authorized to carry guns, a move that authorities said will increase officers' safety and reduce the need for police assistance. Critics say that it could potentially harm the relationship between probation officers and their charges.

The process began in mid-2007 and is scheduled to be completed by the end of June. It will bring the number of armed probation officers to about 160, out of about 1,000 in the department, authorities said.

The initiative comes amid a larger, nationwide trend of authorizing probation officers to carry guns to protect themselves against probationers, particularly gang members, who local authorities said are becoming increasingly violent.

The majority of the personnel armed are officers who perform unannounced searches of probationers that are considered at high risk because of factors such as the severity of their crimes, addictive behavior or the number of crimes they committed.

"When they're unarmed, to do that is a dangerous proposition," said Mack Jenkins, chief probation officer in the San Diego County department, which supervises about 24,000 probationers.

The previous policy during potentially dangerous situations was for armed law enforcement officers to accompany probation officers, who carried only handcuffs and pepper spray, authorities said.

That process was "not the most efficient," Jenkins said.

Newly armed officers must undergo extensive firearms training, officer Scott Huizar said.

Increasing authority

Escondido police Lt. Bob Benton said armed officers with his department are frequently called to provide security for outside agencies, including probation personnel.

"A lot of times, they do call for us, and we have officers stand by to provide any security they need," which could take the police officer out of service for hours at a time, he said.

Carrying a gun also boosts probation officers' confidence and allows more flexibility to visit probationers during off-hours, said deputy probation officer Christy Freetly, who is in the process of qualifying to carry a gun.

"Before, because we were unarmed, we could only go from 8 (a.m.) to 5 (p.m.), and now we can go out at night," and on weekends, said Freetly, who supervises between 35 to 40 sex offenders in North County.

"We're dealing with the worst of the worst, and they really need more structured law enforcement to help remind them that jail is just a step away."

Jenkins said that arming the officers will likely increase the number of unannounced visits and fourth waiver searches, through which probationers or parolees submit to being searched without a warrant.

San Diego County began to arm its probation officers in 1987, and was the first county in the state to do so, Jenkins said. The number has increased slowly since then, though arming was largely limited to officers working with gang members or in multijurisdictional operations, such as large sweeps.

It costs just over \$800 to equip and train each additional officer, Huizar said.

Arming remains controversial

Some probation officials question the need to arm officers, saying that carrying guns could change the rehabilitative nature of officers' work.

"Probation officers have a very unique and difficult position in that they have the dual role of enforcing the law and trying to change peoples' behavior," Carl Wicklund, Executive Director of the American Probation and Parole Association said. "Some may argue that by being armed, they have more of an enforcement role and are losing some of that balance."

Furthermore, Wicklund said there is no concrete evidence "one way or another" that probation officers need guns.

"I don't know if there's anything that shows it makes them safer other than that they may feel safer," he said.

In response, Jenkins said, "A probation officer's job is to protect the community and hold the person accountable and help them redirect their lives ... before they commit another crime. Sometimes, that puts probation officers in harm's way. We have to make sure they are well-trained and well-equipped."

In San Diego County, there have been no cases of probation officers firing shots at probationers, department spokesman Derryl Acosta said. Likewise, there have been no significant attacks on officers visiting homes, he said.

Since 1990, at least three probation officers nationwide have been killed by probationers, including one in Los Angeles in 1994.

In June, a Florida probation officer shot and killed a probationer who refused to let the officer into her home. A grand jury later ruled that the shooting was justified.

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