

Salt Lake City police are giving officers shotguns that shoot beanbags

Police say the shotguns can be used when dealing with people who are suicidal or for ‘crowd control’ during protests.

By Jessica Miller

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As planes lifted off overhead at the police firing range near the airport, Salt Lake City Detective Greg Wilking lifted the shotgun, aimed at the paper target and fired.

The crack of the round wasn’t as loud as the usual bang of a shotgun. And the orange butt stock and forend were a visual give-away that Wilking wasn’t firing a regular firearm.

He was demonstrating one of Salt Lake City’s new less-than-lethal shotguns. The city has put 87 of these weapons into officers’ hands with the goal of ending some confrontations without firing real bullets.

Police officials envision using these guns in situations where someone might be suicidal, armed with a knife and may be in a public space, like a parking lot.

“This is a fantastic tool to use in that scenario because we can maintain that distance from that subject, and be able to engage them in a less-lethal manner and bring a peaceful resolution,” said Sgt. Keith Horrocks during a demonstration held for reporters Monday.

The ammunition looks like a regular shotgun shell, but it’s filled with a small beanbag. It will hurt a person, but police officials say the goal is to cause a bruise rather than breaking through the skin. The additional shotguns have been put into rotation at the start of shifts, Horrocks said, and an officer who has one can’t also have a regular shotgun to avoid confusing one gun for the other. It takes two officers to load the weapon at the beginning of the shift — one who selects the less lethal “Super Sock” ammunition, and a second to verify that it’s the right ammo.



Officers received four hours of training on the less-than-lethal shotguns, primarily to teach them that the beanbag bullets are effective, and what parts of the body to aim at. Horrocks said with these guns, officers will aim for the top of the leg or an arm — avoiding the head, neck and groin area. That’s different from their traditional firearms training, where they are taught to aim for “center mass.”

He said these guns are more accurate than the previous 40mm foam rounds the department has used. And that wasn’t a readily available option at times, because only sergeants had them.

Police officials said they've been working for a few years to get these new guns, and didn't immediately know how much they cost. Wilking said some of their old shotguns were traded in for the less-than-lethal ones.

And while the police said they could use these guns for "crowd control" during protests, they said the purchase wasn't related to the weeks of protests last summer focused on police use of force.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah called out Salt Lake City police last July, decrying officers using [what it deemed unnecessary force against demonstrators](#). One protester had to be carried away from a demonstration after she was hit with a beanbag gun shot at close range, leaving a gaping wound on her thigh.

Lt. Alma Sweeny said the most likely scenario they envision using these less-than-lethal shotguns is while interacting with someone who is suicidal and may have a weapon — ideally when there is another officer nearby who has a regular gun to provide "lethal coverage" in case the person starts to run at the officer with the beanbag gun.

"We're not expecting officers to only use these or only have that coverage," he said. "We still want to have that lethal coverage."

Though they may still have guns during those situation, a new law bans officers from using lethal force [toward people who are suicidal](#) but only pose a risk to themselves. Legislators passed a bill in January that clarified that police should not shoot at someone if they aren't a danger to others around them.

Salt Lake City police officers have been involved in 18 shootings in the past five years, according to a Salt Lake Tribune database of police shootings. They shot at five people last year, and two of them died.

The Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office found officers were justified in four of those shootings, and there is one that is still pending. [That's the case of 13-year-old Linden Cameron](#), a boy with autism who an officer shot and critically injured after his mother called police for help getting him to a hospital.