Changes made to MPD use-of-force policy: Community task force helped shape recommendations

by Rachel Fixsen Moab Sun News
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Following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, citizens across the country joined demonstrations demanding reforms to police departments. The Grand County Sheriff’s Office held a community discussion to review its policies and statistics; Moab City Police Chief Bret Edge, along with Moab Mayor Emily Niehaus, signed a June 4, 2020 proclamation that included a commitment to engaging the community in a review of the department’s use-of-force policy.

A task force of representatives from community organizations was assembled that fall, and has been meeting and considering the policy throughout the winter and spring. [See “Moab police use-of-force policy studied,” Jan. 14 edition. -ed.] Edge recently released the final report from that task force, dated Aug. 18.

In addition to Edge, members of the task force included Luke Wojciechowski, representing the Seekhaven Family Crisis and Resource Center; Belinda Hurst, from Four Corners Behavioral Health; Rhiana Medina, director of the Moab Valley Multicultural Center; and Kelly Thornton of the Utah Department of Workforce Services. Group members reviewed MCPD policies on Use of Force, Control Devices and Techniques, Conducted Energy Device use, Report Preparation, and Medical Aid and Response. They also studied relevant sections of state code, and two Supreme Court cases “that have had significant and longstanding impacts on state and federal laws as well as department policies on police use of force,” according to the final report: Graham vs. Connor and Tennessee vs. Garner.
The group communicated through email over several months, asking questions and offering suggestions for improvement or clarification. Edits to the policy were made only when the group had achieved a consensus on the change.

“The experience was very informative,” said Hurst of her participation in the task force. She said she was impressed with Edge’s receptiveness to public input on the department’s policy, and said discussions with the group delved into the complexities of the use of force in police work.

“There is no ‘cookie cutter’ answer to when and how it should be applied,” Hurst said. “Every situation is different and requires the officer to make quick decisions to determine the safety of the officer and those involved. It gave me new respect for our law enforcement officers and what they go through.”

The final report identifies several changes to the use-of-force policy made by the task force. Annual training that had been recommended became mandatory, and language defining certain immobilization techniques was clarified. A sub-section was also added to address specific prohibitions on the use of force, including excessive, unwarranted or unlawful force; using force based on bias; force used as punishment or retaliation; and force used during lawful, First-Amendment (free speech) assemblies.

The final report notes that even before the task force review, the MCPD Use-of-Force policy had been updated to comply with many recent police reform recommendations.

“We are grateful for this opportunity to engage with key members of our community on such an important policy,” reads the final report. “Use of force impacts officers, the department, our citizens and may even have consequences that extend well beyond our community. It is vital for our use of force policy to be relevant, current and useful to ensure the safety of our officers and the Moab community.”

**MCPD use of force policy review summary**