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# Denver Police Department pursues new use-of-force policy

Denver Police Chief Robert White says officers will be expected to demonstrate emotional intelligence



RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post

Protesters gather for national day of action calling for an end to police violence, July 20, 2016. A group was arrested after blocking the doors at the Denver Police Department.

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The Denver Police Department is changing its use-of-force policy, directing officers to avoid rushing into volatile situations and, instead, to employ de-escalation techniques that limit using weapons against people they encounter.

Denver Police Chief Robert White on Wednesday announced changes, which were written by his command staff in response to the public's changing expectations for police officers. The changes should keep officers and the public more safe, he said.

"Citizens have raised the bar as it relates to what they expect from the police department," White said. "They raised the bar, so I think it's only appropriate that we raise the bar also. Expectations have changed."

The policy's rollout was criticized by the police union and community groups because it did not include their input on the front end. Denver's Citizen Oversight Board and independent monitor were left out, even though a city ordinance says they should be involved in developing police policies.

"The PPA is very disappointed in this new policy for many reasons," Nick Rogers, president of the Police Protective Association, wrote in an e-mail. "First and foremost, the PPA never had any input on this policy. And, according to the 21st Century Policing report, it's important to include input from community members and OFFICERS."

The proposed changes to Denver's use-of-force policy follow a national trend of major cities rethinking how their police interact with citizens after high-profile police shootings around the United States, often involving the deaths of unarmed black men.

White said he considered President Barack Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, models used by other large-city police departments and recommendations from the Police Executive Research Forum, a policing think tank where he serves as secretary of the board of directors.

During a 30-minute presentation Wednesday morning, White talked about his philosophy and how officers must move beyond traditional policing.

The new policy emphasizes the words “necessary” and “reasonable,” rather than legal standards set by state law and precedents established in court cases.

Police traditionally have been guided by legal standards such as shootings being justified if the officer felt his life or someone else’s was in immediate danger.

“That was the comfort zone we were in,” White said. “We want these actions to not only be legal but to be necessary, appropriate and reasonable.”

The policy, which is 10 pages, defines reasonable and necessary force as: “A standard which requires officers to use only that degree of force that is reasonable and necessary under the totality of the circumstances to safely accomplish a legitimate law enforcement function.”

Denver police officers will be expected to demonstrate emotional intelligence, to be critical thinkers and to be polite and professional while remaining in control, White said.

“Citizens complain that officers are very rigid and disrespectful,” he said.

Officers no longer will be told to “stand your ground” and resolve situations as fast as possible, White said. Instead, they will be expected to keep themselves and others out of harm’s way while taking time to think through possible outcomes, he said.

“Officers will ensure they do not engage in unreasonable actions that precipitate the use of force because of tactical, strategic or procedural errors that place themselves or others in jeopardy,” the policy said.

The police department’s revised policy acknowledges officers sometimes will have no choice but to use lethal force, especially when someone pulls a gun on them.

It could mean some situations that led to fatal police shootings in recent years could be avoided in the future.