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TASERs become a staple for local police

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It was a tense moment for Mark Wood and two other Southfield police officers responding to a domestic violence call last year.

They intended to arrest the man of the house, who responded, "I'm not going."

"He was a big man," said Wood, a 20-year veteran of the force, "and we were ready to call for backup."

The man's attitude changed drastically, however, when he saw the yellow, pistol-like device one of the officers was holding. It was a TASER, a weapon that can disable combative suspects with a 50,000-volt shock that disrupts the muscular system.

"I've seen those on TV," said the suspect, meekly extending his arms for the handcuffs, "forget it."

The incident - or something like it - was repeated more than 100 times in 2008, the first full year in which the weapons were standard equipment for Southfield officers.

On 74 occasions, officers deployed (or discharged) the weapon. But at other times the sight of the shocking device was enough to prompt compliance, according to police records.

As far as I'm concerned," said Wood, "it's the best weapons ever developed for police work."

Chief Joseph Thomas Jr. concurs. "In some of those cases officers might have been required to subdue the suspect," he said, and somebody - the suspect or the officers - might have been injured.

Injuries to officers dropped from 12 in 2006, to two in 2008, Thomas reported, "That's a significant reduction."

There was also a significant drop in injuries to suspects, according to the Oakland County Sheriff's Department that issued the weapons department wide in 2003.

"We had a man threatening suicide while holding a shotgun to his head," recalled Undersheriff Michael McCabe. A deputy shocked and disabled him from behind, the undersheriff said, and instead of killing himself the man dropped to the ground without discharging the shotgun.

"He later thanked the deputy for saving his life," McCabe said.

Southfield purchased 75 TASERs in July 2006, on a trial basis. The city council approved 90 more for 2008.

They're much like any other weapon, said Thomas. "Officers are required to undergo training," he said, "and they must qualify (or demonstrate proficiency) every year." Reports are also required each

time an officer deploys (or uses) any weapon.

Southfield officers can expect to use the weapons less frequently in the future - assuming, that is, the department's experience is similar to that of the sheriff's department. Incidents of deputies actually shocking suspects into submission dropped by more than 50 percent over three years, according to department records.

Current state law says only law enforcement officials can carry TASERS. Last year, however, one Michigan legislator proposed legalizing the weapons for all citizens, much as they are in other states. The legislation died in committee, but at some point is expected to be reintroduced.

Officer Woods from Southfield said he has probably benefited from the deterrent affect of the weapon. In the 19 years he worked without a TASER, the officer said he was injured several times trying to subdue suspects. Since he and fellow officers carry TASERS, "things have changed drastically.

"When people see them, they become compliant," he said. "If we use them, the suspect usually drops in his tacks."
