Northeastern to equip officers with semiautomatic rifles

By Aneri Pattani  GLOBE CORRESPONDENT  DECEMBER 09, 2015

Despite opposition from Boston police, the Northeastern University Police Department plans to begin equipping its officers with semiautomatic rifles to respond to campus emergencies.

The move to provide more firepower for the force comes amid heightened worries about mass shootings nationwide and debate over arming college police.

Northeastern police officials said the rifles will be deployed in officers’ vehicles during high-level threats, such as shooters on campus. NUPD Chief Michael A. Davis emphasized that the force has had semiautomatic rifles for years but developed a formal policy to deploy them in light of recent events.

Within a two-week period, three people were killed in a shooting at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado and 14 people were shot to death in San Bernardino, Calif.

“Watch CNN for five minutes,” Davis said. “There are things that are happening around the country that cause us to pay attention.”

At least four other Boston universities — Boston University, MIT, Tufts University, and University of Massachusetts Boston — equip their officers with semiautomatic rifles.

The Northeastern policy, which is expected to launch in mid-December, was made without consulting the Boston Police Department or campus and
community members. Boston police raised concerns this week about Northeastern taking the step unilaterally.

“We’re concerned when we see . . . campus police departments that are within the neighborhoods of the city make decisions without including Boston police in the process,” said Lieutenant Michael McCarthy, a department spokesman. “Decisions like this should involve full community involvement and transparency.”

Boston police learned of Northeastern’s new strategy when Police Commissioner William B. Evans met with the NUPD in November. At the meeting, Evans expressed disapproval of the plan, McCarthy said.

Davis said his department is in “constant contact” with Boston police but acknowledged that the two departments did not discuss the policy change in advance. While Northeastern officers routinely carry handguns, Davis said it is crucial for campus police to have advanced weaponry in emergencies due to their role as first responders.

“It’s a proximity issue,” Davis said. “Our ability to respond quickly is much, much greater.”

However, McCarthy said Boston police and SWAT teams can respond to any emergency within minutes. The Northeastern campus is about half a mile from city police headquarters, 1.3 miles from the BPD’s South End station, and 1.6 miles from the Dudley Square precinct.

“I’m not sure I see the need to arm inner-city college campuses with these long guns when their officers already have firearms,” McCarthy said. “As a matter of getting resources to the school, that can be done in a matter of minutes.”

The Rev. Jeffrey Brown, associate pastor at the Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury, criticized Northeastern’s plan.
“I could understand if the college was in a rural area, a remote place, but it’s right in the middle of the city,” Brown said. “We have a police department, and they’re quite capable of handling these incidents should they occur.”

Northeastern would not say the make and model of the rifle its officers will use. Specialists said most law-enforcement agencies who have the weapons use the AR-15. Versions of the popular rifle were used in the San Bernardino and Newtown, Conn., shootings, authorities have said.

Davis differentiated semiautomatic weapons from assault rifles. He said NUPD’s weapons are called tactical or patrol rifles, which cannot be used in a fully automatic mode.

However, Peter Kraska, a professor at Eastern Kentucky University’s School of Justice Studies, said the terms are interchangeable.

“Tactical is a code word for paramilitary,” Kraska said. “Overall, we’re talking about long guns and the ability to have a lot of rounds fired quickly.”

The NUPD said 20 officers on the 65-member force are undergoing training to use the rifles. They must pass a physical exam, complete an interview process, and undergo 16 hours of training each month with the State Police to have access to the guns.

The training included the department’s first full-scale active shooter drill conducted on campus on Columbus Day.

This year, shootings have erupted at 29 colleges and universities, according to the nonprofit Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund.

Boston University Police Deputy Chief Scott Paré said his department has had the weapons for more than five years. He said the rifles would be used in an active shooter situation, if necessary, but declined to provide further details.
Mit Police Chief John DiFava said his officers carry semiautomatic rifles in their vehicles at all times. The weapons are secured in the vehicles and governed by stringent policies.

DiFava said that MIT’s policy has been in place since fall 2012, and that he believes it is an essential component of preparing officers to handle emergencies.

“Unfortunately, in this crazy world we live in, the chances of a campus police officer responding to an active shooter is very strong,” he said. “I am very comfortable with my strategy. I think not doing this would be incredibly irresponsible.”

The threat tragically hit home when MIT Officer Sean A. Collier was shot and killed by the Boston Marathon bombers.

At UMass Boston, officers carry semiautomatic rifles in their vehicles at all times. The AR-15s are removed only in emergencies or when a supervisor authorizes it, said James Overton, vice chancellor for student affairs.

A Harvard police spokesman would not comment on staffing levels or security measures. Suffolk University police do not carry any firearms, a school spokesman said.

Jan Ransom of the Globe staff contributed to this report, and material from wire services was also used. Aneri Pattani can be reached at aneri.pattani@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter @apattani95.