

NUPD to deploy assault rifles in emergencies

By Aneri Pattani, news correspondent

In a new defense policy expected to launch in mid-December, the Northeastern University Police Department (NUPD) will deploy assault weapons in campus vehicles during emergency situations.

As part of a plan to enhance its response to incidents such as active shooters on campus, the department bought new assault rifles this year to replace its older equipment, but some critics are questioning the initiative's effectiveness.

When first approached about the training, NUPD was hesitant to provide details, citing a need to discuss the best time to release the information. When pressed, the department agreed to reveal more.

NUPD Deputy Chief Ruben Galindo said officers will only use the rifles in the case of an emergency.

"Officers will not be carrying assault rifles on campus," he said. "If we get intelligence that campus security is at a high threat level, the assault rifles will be deployed in vehicles."

Galindo said the advanced weaponry could help save an officer's life in a dangerous situation.

"Depending on the caliber of weapon the subject has and how many subjects there are, firearm capabilities can give the officers an advantage," he said.

However, Kade Crockford, director of the Technology for Liberty program at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Massachusetts, said there is not sufficient evidence to show assault rifles would lessen the damage of a school shooting.

"Assault rifles are not going to stop school shootings," she said. "Campus police departments often say they need it, but there is no evidence to support the claim that this is actually necessary. It might make officers feel more powerful or secure, but feeling is not the same as being."

Albert Sweeney, former associate director of the Northeastern University Public Safety Division who retired in July 2015, said assault rifles are not typically necessary in active-shooter incidents.

"For immediate response to an active-shooter incident, in the first five to seven minutes, the most critical elements for success are the professionalism and training of the first three to four officers properly equipped with their handguns," Sweeney wrote in an email to The News. "They will be the ones getting into formation and moving toward the shooter."

Assault rifles are typically only used in situations where a suspect barricades themselves inside a building, Sweeney added.

NUPD's acquisition of new assault rifles was part of a series of purchases, which also included new handguns and mountain bikes. The purchases were meant to update the department's equipment over the past year, Galindo said. They were funded by NUPD's annual budget from the university.

Twenty NUPD officers are currently undergoing training to be able to use the assault rifles. They must pass a physical exam, complete an interview process and undergo 16 hours of training each month with the Massachusetts State Police in order to have access to the assault weapons.

"We have super high standards of qualification to handle that weapon," Galindo said.

The entire department has been involved in training for the new strategy to respond to active shooters for the past 10 months, even though not all officers will be able to handle assault weapons, Galindo said. The training included the department's first full-scale active shooter drill conducted on campus on Columbus Day.

The preparation is meant to enhance NUPD's effectiveness as first responders, Galindo said. For an on-campus threat, officers from the Boston Police Department (BPD) can take five to 10 minutes to arrive, followed by MBTA Transit Police and State Police, he said.

"All the training that we do is meant to handle the first five minutes without support," Galindo explained.

While many campuses are obtaining assault rifles to confront the threat of violent crime, this type of weaponry is not necessary for the most frequent crimes on college campuses, which include alcohol-related incidents and sexual assault.

Northeastern police and university officials received no reports of murder or manslaughter in 2014, and just one report of aggravated assault, according to the department's most recent annual report. In that same time, the department received 17 reports of sexual assault. The data for 2012 and 2013 show similar trends.

A BPD spokesman said the agency works closely with NUPD to coordinate responses to emergency situations but declined to comment on the campus police's new strategy. BPD headquarters is located beside Northeastern's campus on Tremont Street.

The department's new approach to active-shooter events comes toward the end of a year in which, as of Dec. 1, there have been shootings at 28 colleges and universities, according to the nonprofit Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund. In a recent attack at Umpqua Community College in Oregon, a gunman killed nine people and injured several others before taking his own life.

William Taylor, president of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators and chief of police at San Jacinto College in Texas, said he supports the use of assault rifles in such situations because they have a higher impact than handguns and are more accurate.

"We have realized that if you have an active shooter situation, you have to go immediately," he said. "You don't have time to call in a special team."

He said many institutions across the country are already using assault weapons, and many others are in the process of obtaining them. This trend has grown since the 2007 shooting at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, which left 33 people dead, including the gunman.

"It was a catalyst that made people realize the level of threat and the need to be prepared," Taylor said.

According to a 2014 *New York Times* article, at least 66 universities have obtained assault rifles, including the University of Central Florida, Arizona State University, Florida International University and the University of Maryland.

The new active shooter response plan at Northeastern is expected to launch in mid-December, Galindo said, but it may take longer depending on the need for additional training.

"We are not going to launch until we are confident that they understand the responsibilities of this equipment and are properly trained," Galindo said.

Crockford, of the ACLU, expressed concern that NUPD did not discuss the use of assault rifles with community members before developing its new strategy.

"It's troubling that decisions like this are being made in secret without any public conversation about the merits or drawbacks of such a plan," she said. "Police should be engaged in a dialogue with university community members, but also folks who live in and around campus."

NUPD's goal of maintaining a safe and secure campus includes being prepared to quickly respond to situations that present an immediate threat to public safety, Northeastern representative Renata Nyul said in a statement.

"NUPD officers undergo intensive, high-level training and have the tactical capability to take control of life-threatening situations, both independently and in close coordination with city and state law enforcement," she said. "Like most other urban universities, Northeastern's police department maintains an appropriate inventory of tactical equipment that is standard in reacting to immediate threats."

Northeastern students had mixed opinions about NUPD acquiring assault rifles. Many were shocked the university had not informed them of the development.

"I find this very surprising, and I think this is the worst idea," Jacob Greenberg, a junior psychology major, said. "I support campus police having firearms, but assault rifles are a military-grade weapon, and the potential for misuse is great. Giving them more firepower makes me nervous."

Others saw no fault in the policy, as long as it was executed well.

"If the officers are trained, then I think it is okay for them to have assault rifles," Tony Mannion, a graduate student in pharmacology, said.

Alec Cheung contributed to this report.