Law Enforcement Pursuits: Managing the Risks

By: Sergeant Travis Yates

A Law Enforcement Pursuit is one of the most dangerous performance skills that a police officer can do. Vehicle related incidents are currently killing police at a higher rate than felonious assaults with weapons. Pursuit related deaths of law enforcement officers in 2003 are on pace to be the highest in twenty years. Current data suggest that 40% of all pursuits in the United States end in a collision; 20% result in an injury and approximately 1% ends in death or serious injury. Police agencies must do all they can to manage the contemporary risks associated with a police pursuit.

Most law enforcement agencies have not taken adequate steps to manage these risks. There are four issues that perpetuate the dangers of pursuits within law enforcement agencies:

- There is a lack of training.
- There is a lack of an effective pursuit policy.
- There is a lack in utilizing the proper technology.
- There is an improper mentality by the police officer and administrator.

Training

Officers with the potential to engage in a pursuit should be required to attend mandatory training on a yearly basis. It would be unheard of to not require officers to qualify each year with their service handgun. The pursuit training that is required in most basic academies is a start but what about the fifteen-year veteran that has not been given any additional pursuit training? The typical police officer is given a 2-5 day school in their basic academy on driving. Maybe 4-8 hours of that was spent on pursuit training. With the inundation of modern academy information, does that training block on pursuits come into play five to ten years later when the officer is involved in the real deal? Driving, just like firearm proficiency is a diminished skill. Without continued practice and training, you will lose the skills that you were taught in the academy.

The State of California has taken measures to correct the training deficiency currently present in many police departments. The California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training requires that an officer take two hours of pursuit training per year. Middle managers and above must take one hour per year. This is a legislative requirement and a very good model for other states and police departments to follow.

There should be an emphasis on pursuit training within all law enforcement agencies. Felonious assaults have been dramatically reduced through the aggressive officer safety programs of the last decade. At what point will the police profession deal with the overall lack in pursuit training?
Policy
Police departments must have an effective policy on pursuits. The current trend in progressive departments is to have restrictive policies on pursuits. A pursuit policy should be specific, have accountability, and place supervisors in independent roles as monitors. In addition, the apprehension of a suspect in a pursuit must outweigh the danger it is creating to the public. A sound pursuit policy must be completely understood and followed to be effective. Mandatory reporting and the evaluation of each pursuit will serve as a check and balance to ensure that the pursuit policy is appropriate and followed by officers and supervisors. A sound pursuit policy closely monitored and subsequently followed by officers will be effective in reducing collisions and deaths associated with pursuits.

In 1999, the State of Minnesota mandated that every police agency adopt a pursuit policy that met the basic requirements as set forth by the Minnesota Statutes. This legislative mandate states that the chief law enforcement officer of every state and local law enforcement agency must not only establish a written policy but it must also be enforced. This ensures that every agency conforms to strict pursuit guidelines. Minnesota’s mandated pursuit policy is a great example for other states to follow.

Technology
Many Police Departments are failing to take advantage of available technology when it comes to pursuits. There are many items that can assist an officer in managing a police pursuit. Tire deflation devices, helicopters and intervention techniques are just some of the technological methods available to assist law enforcement agencies in reducing the risks associated with police pursuits.

Tire Deflation Devices are designed to deflate vehicle tires in a controlled manner. Although they will not cause a suspect to stop, tire deflation devices have proven to reduce the overall speed and length of a department’s police pursuits. The management of these two aspects is a must to decrease the overall danger of a police pursuit. A recent study by the Jacksonville (Florida) Police Department revealed that although only one-half of their units have tire deflation devices, 13% of their pursuits were ended with their usage. The Oklahoma Highway Patrol and Oklahoma City Police Department have placed Stop Sticks in every vehicle. Both agencies credit this device with slowing and ending many of their police pursuits. The cost of tire deflation units are under $400. That is a very small price to pay in an effort to reduce the risks that pursuits pose to citizens and officers.

Helicopters are being utilized in many jurisdictions as a safe means to pursue suspects. The helicopter can pursue the vehicle safely from the air and the ground units can follow a safe distance behind waiting for the violator to stop. Research has shown that in the vast majority of situations, a suspect eluding law enforcement officers will either drive within the traffic flow or abandon their vehicle once the police are no longer chasing them. The Tulsa Police Department currently uses this method and the research is confirmed. In the majority of the pursuits, the violator will slow down and stop their vehicle shortly after they no longer see police vehicles. Once the driver has exited the car, the helicopter can advise the ground units of the suspect’s location. A helicopter can also see streets and intersections well ahead of the pursuit. This is important because it educates the officer and monitoring supervisor of future hazards that may
arise. Although the use of helicopters in police pursuits has been effective, there are suspects that will continue to drive very fast and reckless regardless of police presence. Due to that, additional measures are necessary in combating police pursuits.

The Pursuit Intervention Technique (P.I.T.) or Tactical Vehicle Intervention (T.V.I.) is the current hot topic in pursuit techniques. The cost is minimal and the training is relatively easy to conduct. This is a tactic where the police touch their car to the back quarter panel of the violator. Once that occurs, the officer can turn into the suspect car and accelerate, which causes a loss of tire traction. In 90% of the cases, the engine will shut down, stopping the pursuit. This technique is severely misunderstood by officers and administrators. Police pursuits depicted on television and the vehicle ramming of the past has contributed to a clouded view of this precision-driving maneuver. Many Oklahoma agencies have begun to use this technique with success including the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, Sand Springs Police Department and Midwest City Police. When conditions are appropriate, the pursuit intervention technique is a very effective method in ending police pursuits. Despite the proven success of restrictive policies and pursuit technology, the correct mental aspect of a police pursuit is a requirement in managing the risks involved.

Mental Aspect
Some police administrators do not have the correct mentality about police pursuits. It often takes media pressure or a negative incident before changes are made in pursuit practices. Administrators must be proactive in implementing sound pursuit policies and training. They should spend money in an effort to obtain the adequate technology to protect the lives of their officers and citizens. Police administrators should make a conscious effort to reduce the risks involved in pursuits before civil litigation or public pressure forces them to.

Some police officers do not have the correct mentality when it comes to pursuits. The pursuit of criminal activity is at the very heart of what a police officer wants to do. An officer must be conditioned to keep emotion out of the vehicle pursuit process. The contempt of cop mentality is prevalent during pursuits and often times catching the suspect supersedes basic safety premises. Having the proper mindset and making good decisions go hand in hand when engaging in a police pursuit.

Police pursuits will always bring an element of danger to the police and community. That danger can be reduced and the risk managed through the implementation of a proper policy, professional training program and use of available technology.

Sergeant Travis Yates is a Team Leader with the Tulsa Police Law Enforcement Driver Training Unit. He is a nationally recognized driving instructor and a certified instructor in tire deflation devices and the pursuit intervention technique. Sergeant Yates has a Master of Science Degree in Criminal Justice from Northeastern State University. He moderates policedriving.com, a national website dedicated to law enforcement driving issues.
Additional Resources

ALERT International - www.alertinternational.com
Dr. Geoffrey Alpert - www.deadlyforce.com
Stop Stick, Ltd. - www.stopstick.com
Officer Down Memorial Page - www.odmp.org
California POST - www.post.ca.gov
Minnesota POST - www.dps.state.mn.us/newpost/links.asp