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"Public Safety through Professional Service"

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SHERIFF PRESS RELEASE

Date/Time: September 14, 2021 @ 0900
Contact: Sheriff Robert R. Snaza
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Release #: 6

WASHINGTON POLICE REFORM LAWS TACTICS

National events over the last year have brought some of the tactics that police use into the spotlight, causing law enforcement and the communities they serve to examine whether certain long-standing tactics should remain as options for law enforcement to use. During the 2021 legislative session, the Washington State legislature determined that the tactics discussed below should be at least limited in scope, and in some instances completely banned from use by law enforcement in the course of their duty.

Some of these tactics have seldom been, if ever, used by the Lewis County Sheriff's Office (LCSO). However, others are tactics that we have trained for and used, when necessary, as a specific situation would reasonably dictate.

Neck Restraints

Neck restraints of any kind, for any situation, may no longer be used by law enforcement. While LCSO deputies have been trained on the use of this restraint method (not chokeholds), they have been seldom used and moving forward, based on this new legislation, will not be used.

No-Knock Warrants

A no-knock warrant can no longer be requested, granted by courts, or served by law enforcement. As anecdotal information, the LCSO has not served a no-knock warrant during my time as elected Sheriff.

Tear Gas

Tear gas is a tool that has been used by law enforcement across the county, when necessary, to manage crowds that are creating public safety risks. Fortunately, its use in Lewis County for these reasons has not been necessary while I've been Sheriff. Under the new law, the use of tear gas is strictly limited. It may be used only to alleviate the present risk of serious harm during a riot, with a barricaded subject, and/or a hostage situation. All alternatives to its use must be exhausted and, in the case of use during a riot, the county's highest elected official must give permission for its use, and refers to the chair of the Board of County Commissioners for authorization. Through the Prosecutor's Office, the County Commissioners and myself are seeking a declaratory judgement with the State Attorney General's Office regarding this authorization.

Military-Type Equipment

The new law does not allow agencies to use “military-type equipment”, whether obtained from military surplus or other sources. This includes armed vehicles and drones, rocket launchers, grenades, and firearms/ammunition of .50 caliber or great. LCSO previously used 12 gauge shotguns and 40mm launchers for deployment of less lethal munitions, such as beanbags. By definition, these firearms/launchers are greater than .50 caliber and are therefore specifically prohibited for use by law enforcement. As such, our deputies no longer have these tools at their disposal. Because of these restrictions, we are researching other equipment options to aid our deputies in community safety services while complying with the specific legislative restrictions.

Vehicular Pursuits

LCSO has always had a policy allowing for vehicular pursuits, but only under certain circumstances, and deputies had engaged in justified vehicle pursuits several times each year. Under the new law, law enforcement’s ability to pursue a fleeing vehicle is significantly restricted. Now, the only time our deputies may pursue a vehicle is if we have probable cause to believe that someone in the vehicle has, or is going to, commit a limited number of violent felonies or sex crimes, along with several other qualifying restrictions having to be met before a pursuit will be allowed. The new law also allows for the pursuit of drivers who may be under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Under the previous law, law enforcement could have pursued individuals suspected of committing any serious crime (for example stolen vehicles), even if probable cause had yet to be established. Under the new law, such pursuits will no longer be allowed.

As stated in previous releases, we look forward to continued open dialogue with community members about the new laws as they are implemented, along with working in partnerships to discover innovative ways within the confines of these new laws to address public safety concerns. We thank you for your interest and continued support, and please do not hesitate to inquire about these changes, and/or future legislative adjustments or clarifications that come about, or any other aspect of the services we provide.

Lewis County Sheriff's Office Mission Statement:

Being a committed community partner, providing professional service to enhance the safety, security, and quality of life in Lewis County.