

Taser use in Michigan prisons reduces injuries, sparks controversy

EUP News Staff

Assaults on Michigan corrections officers have fallen since some began carrying Tasers 1½ years ago, but critics question whether the electronic stun guns are being misused.

The number of officers assaulted on the job dipped 16%, from 688 in 2010 to 579 last year, according to a review of prison critical incident statistics by the Lansing State Journal. Corrections and union officials say the drop is partly due to a major expansion of Taser use in prisons last year. Taser use began on a pilot basis at five prisons in December 2011 and was expanded to all prisons last year, except the state medical facility housing mentally ill people.

“Staff are no longer having to physically break up inmate-on-inmate altercations,” said Russ Marlan, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections. “We saw a significant number of employees injured for that reason.”

Tasers are an important nonlethal option for corrections officers, who traditionally do not carry guns to prevent them from falling into inmates’ hands, corrections officials said.

But inmates advocates question whether guards could abuse or overuse Tasers as a disciplinary tool. Tasers discharge two prongs that deliver an electric shock, produce muscle contractions and incapacitate the person.

“I think you are going to have guards that are trigger-happy with the Tasers,” said Kay Perry, executive director of Michigan CURE, a Kalamazoo-based prisoner rights organization. “They require a great deal of judgment. My bottom line is to get them out of there.”

But Mel Grieshaber, executive director of the Michigan Corrections Organization, which represents the state’s roughly 7,000 corrections officers, said very few officers have abused the devices and noted that cameras placed throughout the prisons would record misconduct.

So far, eight corrections department employees have been disciplined for inappropriate use of Tasers, according to department officials. One officer failed to give a warning before using it, one left a Taser unsecured in a drawer, two joked they were going to stun a co-worker, two inadvertently took a Taser home, one was involved in “horseplay” with a Taser and one pointed the device improperly during a test, officials said.

None of the officers lost their jobs.

Perry said she fears officers are using Tasers against inmates when it’s not necessary. In the Muskegon Correctional Facility two months ago, she said, officers used a Taser to subdue a diabetic inmate who was being aggressive and uncooperative because he was experiencing a hypoglycemic, or low blood sugar, reaction.

Marlan said corrections officers get eight hours of training and are instructed to use Tasers to stop ongoing or imminently violent or dangerous situations.

“It should be noted that it is also stressed in this training that clear, direct verbal communication is never to be replaced by the use of Tasers,” Marlan said.

Prison statistics indicate Tasers are being used sparingly — once or twice a day, on average. Since Oct. 1, 2012, officers have discharged Tasers 576 times, according to corrections department reports.

The same statistics suggest Tasers are being used as a supplement to the longtime use of chemical spray to subdue or disperse inmates — not replacing it. Corrections officers used chemical spray 180 times last year, down only slightly from 183 in 2010.

Although any assault on an employee is considered serious, very few resulted in serious physical injury. Last year, the department categorized 96% of those assaults as resulting in a “non-serious” physical injury or no injury at all. Still, prison officials are satisfied enough with the success of the program that they are evaluating whether to have more officers carry Tasers, Marlan said.

Daniel Heyns, a former Jackson County sheriff appointed by Gov. Rick Snyder as department of corrections director in 2011, signed off on Taser use in the belief it would make the prisons safer.

“We do think it is better for safety; not only for officers, but safer for prisoners,” Grieshaber said.

Injuries declining

Assaults to Michigan correctional employees

	2010	2011	2012	Change since 2010
Death or serious physical injury	0	3	0	0%
Sexual assault-penetration	1	0	0	-100%
Sexual assault-without penetration	2	0	1	-50%
Sexual assault-minor	22	12	21	-5%
Non-serious physical injury	277	209	202	-27%
No physical injury	386	420	355	-8%
Total	688	644	579	-16%

Source: Michigan Department of Corrections