

Sharpening Waltham 's defense



Photo by Contributed
Police train with the North Eastern
Massachusetts Law Enforcement
Council

By Jeff Gilbride/Daily News staff
GHS
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Waltham -

On Wednesdays police officers train for
worst-case scenarios.

"There's active shooter situations, we go
up to numerous firearms training, we all
receive training in incident command and
hostage negotiation. The Waltham
officers receive training across the

board," Officer Charles DiChiara said of training through the North Eastern
Massachusetts Law Enforcement Council.

The council is a consortium of approximately 43 police departments in Middlesex
and Essex counties, with a mission to provide support for neighboring police
officers in times of need.

Within the council, there are various units: SWAT, school threat assessment and
response, computer crimes, crime scene services, motorcycle and other
divisions.

DiChiara trains North Eastern Massachusetts Law Enforcement Council officers,
coaching them through shooting episodes and hostage situations.

This year the team was awarded the George L. Hanna Award for Bravery for a situation in Pepperell in which a 20-year-old took his mother and girlfriend hostage. The man fired at officers, DiChiara said.

"We spent about 67 hours in Pepperell getting shot at. Eventually we were able to fire tear gas in there and we were able to take him into custody without any serious injury to police officers," DiChiara said.

North Andover Police Chief Richard Stanley said DiChiara was calm under pressure.

"He had to stand and expose himself to open fire while being covered by other officers. He fired through windows and never missed a shot," Stanley said. "His experiences and his level of expertise to communicate to young officers is a credit to not only the Waltham Police Department but to the SWAT team."

A decade for Waltham

Waltham Police became involved with the council about 10 years ago.

There are about 175 officers on the rapid response team across 43 participating departments, DiChiara said.

"We had a tryout, and now we have four Waltham officers on the SWAT team."

Waltham Police Sgt. James Vaglica has been involved in the organization for about 11 years.

"I started out on the (Regional Response Team) ... we handle anything from large disturbances to large searches and crowd control," Vaglica said. "It's just a great networking opportunity. You talk to cops from the whole area ... I've been on the SWAT team for 10 years. I can respond at any time. I'm on call 24/7."

Through the council, Vaglica was called to Boston for the Red Sox World Series riots in 2004.

"Boston Police asked for our help," Vaglica said. "I was there for the World Series. There had to be 50,000 people crammed into Kenmore Square and it turned into a riot. People were just being stupid. We had to move them out."

On call 24/7

Teams respond to any town or city within its 43 communities to handle crises, DiChiara said.

"Its kind of like an insurance policy ... You have a team that can come in and handle any situation. The good thing about NEMLEC is if you call in a SWAT team, the SWAT team doesn't take over the situation," DiChiara said. "They come in and they will assist your city and town. The local incident commander has control of the situation. They tell us what they want us to do."

According to Vaglica, the council has been used several times in Waltham.

"I remember someone in a house armed with a lethal weapon that was not coming out," he said. "NEMLEC has also been to Waltham twice for a person with a firearm threatening suicide ... The (Regional Response Team) was also in Waltham for an escaped prisoner. One of the prisoners had walked away (from a community service task) up into Prospect Hill."

According to Stanley, the officers involved in the council's SWAT team are some of the mostly highly trained officers in the country.

"These people on SWAT are the cream of the crop. Those 38 men, a lot of them are veterans that have served time in the Army in combat operations. They are at the highest level of integrity and physical conditioning and they can handle pressure situations better than anyone I would dare say in the country," Stanley said. "They are at that level. They have been in the position where they can easily take people's lives but they held their shots because they have the competency, integrity and skills to do their job."

Back to Basics

The organization traces its roots to the 1960s, according to Stanley, a unit control chief.

"In the 60s when NEMLEC began it started with a few police departments strictly for having crowd control to deal with war protests," Stanley said. "Since then, it's grown into this whole (law enforcement) 'regionalization' concept in New England."

According to Stanley, every police department has one vote and their police chief is a member of the board of directors.

"You have an equal say in what happens in NEMLEC," Stanley said.

From Waltham, Chiara, Officer Thomas Moran, Sgt. Paul Womersley, Officer Michael Fogg, Officer Jorge Orta, Detective Jeffrey Callahan, Officer Stephen McCarthy and Sgt. James Vaglica are assigned to the Regional Response Team with Callahan, McCarthy, DiChiara and Vaglica specifically assigned to the SWAT Team.

Sgt. John Brooks and Officers Miguel Marrero, Edward Scraggs, Richard Modica and Anthony Conran are assigned to council's motorcycle unit.

According to Stanley, who was the president of the organization from 1990-02, the council represents close to 3,000 police officers.

With permission of a local police chief from the communities the organization covers, any officer who passes a physical fitness exam can be put into a specialized unit within the council.

"If a police officer has a desire, knowledge, skills and abilities that he or she wants to develop, they can fulfill their dream and they can work in a smaller size community while seeing the activity level of a large city," Stanley said. "In addition, they are gaining a lot of experience and training so they can bring that back to their departments to assist other officers."

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