

H2O + OC = Compliance

By Keith Martin, Assistant Editor

related materials:

5/19/2003

From spray to foam to PepperBall, the distribution of Oleoresin Capsicum - better known as OC or pepper spray - has taken numerous forms for corrections agencies to use in quelling disturbances. In California, however, 19 institutions are currently utilizing a new technology that mixes OC with water to control inmates while also protecting staff.

The technology is the brainchild of the state Department of Corrections (CDC) and a California-based company, Hydro-Force, Inc., who worked together to take a simple concept and turn it into a useful tool for corrections.

'Seven years ago, [the CDC] came to us and said they wanted to spray [unruly] inmates with water,' said Dennis Berglund, President of Hydro-Force, Inc. 'We discovered [during the early stages of the technology] that we didn't need a water cannon but instead, water to distribute the chemical. Our initial thought was to knock [an inmate] down, but once we installed it, it really became a chemical delivery system that sprayed [inmates].'

One of the first installations of the Water Restraint System was at Calipatria State Prison in 1998, which had been experiencing numerous violent acts in its administrative segregation recreation yards.

'We were having constant problems and assaults everyday [in those yards],' said Lt. Gary Stratton, Public Information Officer at Calipatria who formerly worked in the administrative segregation unit. 'Now, [the system is our] primary tool in those yards, depending on the incident. We've seen the number of our serious incidents go down [since the system's installation].'

Having a 'Pick Up and Shoot' Tool

The system is comprised of two main elements: the water delivery mechanism and a control panel. The delivery mechanism is equipped with a nozzle that distributes the water/OC mixture as well as a camera that assists officers in aiming the device at the required target. Most of the 40 systems being used in California are mounted on building rooftops or self-supporting towers and are custom-installed to ensure that the effect of the spray can reach desired targets no matter where they are in the yard.

From a remote location - usually a tower or adjacent observation booth - officers can view the target area on a monitor and control the nozzle's movement and spray volume through the control panel.

With most of the adjustments pre-set to use, officers have a quick, effective tool to deploy to gain inmates' compliance.

'The system is designed to be semi-automatic,' said Berglund. 'First thing in the morning, the operator turns the system on to charge it [because] it uses air pressure to inject the chemical [into the water]. It can sit in stand-by mode and all they have to do is use the control stick [to fire]. The theory is to have something like a weapon that you pick up and shoot with no pre-emptive adjustments.'

When the device is activated, the movement of the nozzle and subsequent warning buzzer is often enough to make an unruly inmate consider compliance without even firing the water, said Stratton.

'We had a one-on-one fight the other day and we yelled 'yard down' and [were ignored],' he said. 'So the nozzle moved [toward the fight] and when that moves, the buzzer goes off. So within the three to five seconds it took [to move the nozzle their way], the inmates said 'the heck with that' [and complied].'

In fact, adds Stratton, soon after installation, the device's impact was evident - even before it was fired.

'When it was installed, for the first two weeks, the inmates didn't know what it was and what it did and no one wanted to be the first to try it out,' he said. 'Now, inmates are aware of what it does, but some will do what they feel they have to do [regardless]. Having it [here] says that when they are hit [with the spray], they will stop.'

Berglund adds that since the system has been installed at the Mule Creek State Prison, there have been no incidents in their administrative segregation yard. Additionally, staff from the prison told him that inmates have even passed the word that if there is going to be a fight, it should be outside the yard.

The inmates have [told one another] not to fight in the yard because they don't want to get hit with [the spray because of the actions of others],' he said.

Providing a Safer Distribution of OC

According to Berglund, the system is an excellent tool for corrections agencies to use on groups of people that are 20 to 150 feet away. Ideally, the spray and subsequent mist is employed to subdue multiple targets versus dispersal on a one-to-one ratio. In fact, he adds, unlike other OC and impact weapons, the system is intentionally different because while dubbed 'less lethal,' such devices can be dangerous if aimed at the wrong spot.

'[Our] system provides good control and non-lethal control,' said Berlund. 'The PepperBall, for example, is nice but it is so localized. You can create a cloud around the target, however, but with [our system] you hit and immerse the subject and they stop.'

In fact, he adds, use of the water restraint system in California has resulted in no workers compensation claims by staff and virtually no inmate injuries besides prolonged burning sensations from the OC.

'In the five years [we've had these installed], we have sent no [inmates] to the clinic because of the operation [of the system] versus those sent to for broken bones and other injuries because of impact weapons,' said Berglund.

For Stratton, while officers at Calipatria were initially apprehensive about using the system, now it is second nature and they expect to use it if an incident occurs in one of the two yards the device is positioned near.

Also, he said, use of the system takes the decision of what response tool to employ out of the hands of officers, which can be a good thing in a rapidly evolving situation.

'With this, they automatically know what to use and it takes out the 'right versus wrong' choice for them,' said Stratton.

He adds that in terms of effectiveness, the system also works better than other traditional less lethal devices, which staff recognize.

'For our administrative segregation area, its on the top of our less lethal capabilities and works better than other options,' he said. 'If we use 'triple chaser' [munitions], you can get a smoke cloud that [will hurt your line of vision] and with .37 millimeter [less lethal rounds], for an officer that doesn't shoot them constantly, accuracy is not that good.'

Stratton said that every week the prison conducts training on the system for those officers who have never fired it so they can get the feel of the control panel and how to direct the nozzle.

'Our officers find it easy to use,' he said. 'We set up trash cans [in the yard] and have them train on pointing [the nozzle]. Just getting the pointing of the nozzle down [can take a little time to learn].'

As for Calipatria's inmates, Stratton said they've learned how the device works and one has especially made his feelings on the device quite clear.

'He told me he'd rather have the .37 millimeter [projectile] fired at him and leave a bruise rather than the OC which gets everywhere and they hate that,' he said.

Resources

For more information on the Hydro-Force Water Restraint System, go to: www.hydroforceinc.com.

© Copyright 1996-2003. The Corrections Connection. All Rights Reserved
Printed with permission from Keith L. Martin, Assistant Editor