

STATE

LAGRANGE

Police use-of-force training draws pros, foes

By Brad Schrade

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Some called for the police chief to be fired. Others said he was endangering his officers. They accused him of pandering to activists in the national debate about police use of force.

These were just some of the comments directed at LaGrange Police Chief Lou Dekmar on social media and in emails after a story about his new “shoot to incapacitate” training program was published last week by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. But Dekmar also spurred interest and debate among police leaders interested in learning more about the course designed to lessen the chance of death in situations where an officer has to fire a gun in the line of duty.

The interest has spurred the LaGrange Police Department to schedule an orientation training seminar on Friday, which as many as two dozen Georgia police agencies are expected to attend. Though no other agencies have committed to implementing the new training and policy, the response is what Dekmar was hoping for when he went public with the program.

“None of the criticism surprised me,” Dekmar said. “None of the concerns that were communicated are ones that we hadn’t considered. This isn’t something that we came up with last week.”

The strong reaction underscores how deeply entrenched American police orthodoxy is around use of deadly force. For decades, officers have been trained to aim their guns at the center mass of the body — typically the chest, upper torso and head area. That philosophy has contributed to the roughly 1,000 fatal police shootings annually across the country and helped plunge the police profession into a

crisis unlike anything in its history.

LaGrange is teaching officers an alternative if they must fire their weapon. It’s instructing them to consider, in some instances, aiming for the pelvic area, abdomen, legs or arms of a subject. The hope is that shots to these areas, while potentially fatal, will increase the chance that a person could survive.

The training emphasizes that use of deadly force still must be appropriate and necessary to employ the tactic. But it’s designed to give officers an option in cases where the suspect may have a weapon other than a gun, such as a club, knife or blunt object.

Officers are still allowed to aim for center mass, if they deem it necessary. The hope is that in some cases, such as those involving the mentally ill or “suicide-by-cop” situations, the technique may help preserve life while also protecting the officer and the public.

Albany Police Chief Michael Persley said police, especially in today’s climate, need to be open to new ideas.

He plans to attend the May 21 training, where he will assess the program and do his own research before making a decision on whether it could work in his southwest Georgia community.

“It’s a challenge to what you’ve been taught over the years,” he said. “In a lot of officer-involved shootings, if you talk to people afterwards, they don’t want to take a life. You want to stop the threat, but you don’t want to take a life.”

The Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police, which has taken no formal position about the training, sent an email to hundreds of police leaders alerting them to the orientation training. The association’s executive director, Butch Ayers, the for-



LaGrange Police Chief Lou Dekmar says his goal is to give his officers another tool in the use-of-force spectrum — to shoot not to kill. CURTIS COMPTON/CURTIS.COMPTON@AJC.COM

mer Gwinnett police chief, said there’s a lot of concern about the program because it’s different.

“Right now people are in a position where they want to learn more about it before they pass judgment,” he said.

Bibb County Sheriff David Davis read the article in the AJC and, after some initial skepticism, said he became intrigued by the idea. He doesn’t know if it will work in Macon, but he’s sending his training leadership to LaGrange next week to check out the program.

“I’m going into it with an open mind,” he said. “If we don’t evolve in this profession, we’re destined to become stagnant and possibly miss some revolutionary ideas.”

The Georgia Public Safety Training Center in Forsyth has been flooded with calls and emails about the program, many of them critical, according to Chadd Wilson, director of the center’s basic training division. He said the center’s leadership plans to be at the training session in LaGrange to take measure for themselves. “We want to see what the content is,” he said. “We’ll make a determination after that.”

police professionals. He said he has confidence, though, in his chief and his judgment.

“I know Chief Dekmar would never do anything to put the safety of his officers at risk,” Thornton said.

Dekmar, who has been in law enforcement for more than four decades, is a former president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

He said he first learned of the concept nearly two decades ago during an exchange program in Israel. He later learned that countries in Europe also incorporate the shoot-to-incapacitate concept into their training and policies on use of deadly force.

At first, Dekmar had reservations about the idea. Then, after conducting his own research, he thought it had promise. In 2019,

LaGrange firearms instructors and other leaders started researching the concept. They developed the training last year and started implementing it in February.

He’s hopeful that once other police leaders learn more, they will warm to the idea. He says it’s not a panacea for all the issues facing police use of force, but he believes it holds promise to save lives. If that happens, he said, it can increase community confidence in law enforcement.

“What’s been lost here is we did not have one police officer who went through this training — and these are difficult times — that was critical of this option,” he said. “Not one. That carries significant weight with me. Officers don’t want to take a life and they are looking for options.”