

Allentown Chief is thinking about the “first contact” situation, we’re not

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police November 7, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

“Allentown’s police chief is asking the city for a little more money next year for programs that could lessen the chance of a deadly encounter between a citizen and an officer.”

As always, this is Gadfly keeping an eye on what’s going on around us. Allentown is addressing the “first contact” situation. While Bethlehem **is not**.

Selections from Paul Muschick, “Defund the police? Why that’s a bad idea in Allentown.” Morning Call, November 2, 2020.

Allentown’s police chief is asking the city for a little more money next year for programs that could lessen the chance of a deadly encounter between a citizen and an officer, and improve relations with the community.

The request is reasonable. I hope it doesn’t become a target of the defund the police movement.

You can’t take funding away from police departments and expect officers to be well-trained and well-equipped to respond perfectly to every situation. In many cases, a top-notch department will cost more.

Philadelphia police have been criticized for fatally shooting a knife-wielding, mentally ill man on Monday instead of trying to subdue him with a Taser. But the officers were not equipped with Tasers.

Thousands of Philadelphia officers don’t carry them despite a recommendation from the U.S. Department of Justice and a plan that was put into place several years ago to make Tasers standard equipment,

The Philadelphia Inquirer reported. A police spokesman said funding was an issue.

We will never know if a Taser would have made a difference. But if it had, and if Walter Wallace Jr. hadn't died, the looting and rioting that are terrorizing parts of Philadelphia now wouldn't be happening.

Fortunately, Allentown has not had such problems.

The goal is to keep it that way, and some of the additional money that police Chief Glenn Granitz Jr. asked for on Wednesday could help.

He is seeking \$40.8 million for the department next year, an increase of about 1.25% from the \$40.3 million budget approved for this year.

The additional expenses include a second community intervention specialist, a civilian who arranges services, including mental health services, to people who need assistance with problems that may result in police being called. By getting them help, the goal is to reduce the need for police to repeatedly respond to the same location for the same issue.

Granitz said the city is working with Cedar Crest College to analyze the impact the specialists are having, including whether there is a decrease in officers using force.

Other budget requests include money to upgrade and expand the city's network of street surveillance cameras. Not only can the cameras help officers solve crimes, but they can be used to hold officers accountable if they do something wrong.

The department also wants to replace its 10-year-old robot, which also is outdated and inefficient. The newer one slated for purchase is more nimble and able to climb stairs and reach small areas of buildings that cannot be reached by the current robot.

During standoffs and other tense situations, robots can be used to communicate with people and serve as the eyes and ears of officers, instead of an officer coming face to face with someone who may react violently.

The department also wants to increase training, and complete training it already has begun. About 40% of Allentown officers have gone through crisis intervention training, which includes instruction from not only law enforcement professionals, but from mental health providers and family advocates.

“This is something that I believe the community is asking for,” Granitz said.

If city residents want a top-notch force that’s well-trained and well-equipped to deal with problems, and to prevent riot-inciting incidents, they have to be willing to pay for it.