

COMMUNITY OPPOSITION TO TASERS IN SAN FRANCISCO  
An Open Letter to the Police Commission

February 11, 2011

San Francisco Police Commission  
Thomas J. Cahill Hall of Justice  
850 Bryant Street, Room 505  
San Francisco, California 94103-4603

Dear Commissioners,

As a diverse coalition of community-based organizations, we write to address an issue of enormous concern to many communities in San Francisco: Tasers. We respectfully request that you vote “no” on any effort to bring Tasers to San Francisco. Tasers are highly controversial and ultimately will erode trust between communities and the police.

The Police Commission recently unanimously voted to establish specially trained Crisis Intervention Teams to respond to calls involving people in psychiatric crises. We thank you for your historic vote on this issue. The training protocol adopted by the Commission expressly calls for the use of de-escalation techniques. While Tasers are less-lethal than firearms, they are nevertheless the opposite of the de-escalation training unanimously endorsed by the Commission.

Several prominent organizations and experts have weighed in on Tasers:

- The United Nations Committee Against Torture has declared the use of Tasers to be a form of torture<sup>1</sup>.
- Amnesty International has called for governments and law enforcement agencies to prohibit or severely restrict the use of Tasers<sup>2</sup>.
- An independent UCSF study found that deaths by officer shootings *more than doubled* in the first full year of Taser implementation, and that sudden deaths in custody increased almost sixfold<sup>3</sup>.
- A Canadian government inquiry found that, following the rollout of Tasers in British Columbia, police shooting deaths increased between 1992 and 2007<sup>4</sup>.
- A 2007 study on Tasers and mental health issues found that “people in acute agitation related to mental illness may experience the high levels of arousal associated with unexplained death in custody,” and “people taking prescribed antipsychotic medication are already at increased risk of sudden cardiac death<sup>5</sup>.”
- A 2010 National Institute of Justice report states: “impairment by drugs, alcohol or mental illness was associated with a 50-percent increase in the odds of suspect injury<sup>6</sup>.”

In a recent use-of-force study<sup>7</sup>, the San Francisco Police Department found a third of officer-involved shootings during a recent five-year-period involved individuals who were mentally ill. Taser proponents argue that Tasers would prevent such shootings. However, a 2009 Ninth Circuit Court of Appeal ruling that upheld the right of a man to sue for Taser-related injuries noted:

The government has an important interest in providing assistance to a person in need of psychiatric care; thus, the use of force that may be justified by that interest necessarily differs both in degree and in kind from the use of force that would be justified against a person who has committed a crime or who poses a threat to the community<sup>8</sup>

Tasers are not a method of providing assistance to a person in need of psychiatric care. To the contrary, such persons are more likely to suffer severe Taser-related injury or death. The Commission has just adopted a model training program to address people in psychiatric crises. Arming officers with Tasers would defeat the purpose of this program.

Last year, the Commission heard from many community groups who called for a community vetting of Tasers. Since then, there has been no outreach to the communities who would be most affected by implementation of Tasers. In particular, communities of color have not been invited to participate in the process. Similarly, mental health professionals have not been asked to weigh in on the use of Tasers on people suffering from emotional disturbances.

A 2007 report prepared for the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination indicated: “[E]xisting evidence suggests that Tasers are disproportionately used against people of color,” and recommended that state and federal authorities “impose an immediate moratorium on Taser use by law enforcement officers...”<sup>9</sup> NAACP chapters across the country have called for a ban on Tasers.

Additionally, Tasers – completely unregulated by an state, federal or international entity – are made by Taser International, a Scottsdale, Arizona, company. San Francisco officials are boycotting Arizona because of the state’s profiling of people of color and immigrants. The implementation of Tasers would put San Francisco in opposition to the United Nations, Amnesty International the American Civil Liberties Union, The National Lawyers Guild, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and our own communities.

San Francisco can afford neither the actual cost of Tasers (estimated to be \$2 million), nor the lawsuits which are sure to follow if Tasers are implemented. The Crisis Intervention Teams should be given a chance to work before embracing such controversial weapons. A comparative safety study of various intermediate force weapons is prudent, if it is determined that such a weapon is necessary at all. At the very least, the Commission must outreach to affected communities before taking action that would almost certainly further erode trust between police and the communities they serve.

Respectfully Submitted,

Asian and South East Asian Societies  
Causa Justa :: Just Cause  
Central American Resource Center  
Coalition on Homelessness  
Community United Against Violence  
Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club  
Instituto Familiar de la Raza, Inc.  
La Raza Centro Legal  
People Organized to Win Employment Rights  
People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights  
Young Workers United

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<sup>1</sup> UN Torture Panel Singles Out Tasers, New York Times, Nizza, M., November 26, 2007

<sup>2</sup> ‘Less Than Lethal’? The Use of Stun Weapons in US Law Enforcement, Amnesty International, 2008

<sup>3</sup> Relation of Taser (Electrical Stun Gun) Deployment to Increase in In-Custody Sudden Deaths, Lee, B., Vittinghoff, E., Whiteman, D., Park, M., Lau, L., Tseng, Z., The American Journal of Cardiology, 2009

<sup>4</sup> Restoring Public Confidence: Restricting the Use of Conducted Energy Weapons in British Columbia, Braidwood Commission on Conducted Energy Weapon Use, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Health Professionals and the Monitoring of Taser Use, O’Brien, J., McKenna, B., Simpson, A., Psychiatric Bulletin, 2007

<sup>6</sup> A Multi-Method Evaluation of Police Use of Force Outcomes: Final Report to the National Institute of Justice, Smith, J., Kaminski, R., Alpert, G., Fridell, L., MacDonald, J., Kubu, B., US Department of Justice, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Officer-Involved Shootings: A Five-Year Study, San Francisco Police Department, January 2010

<sup>8</sup> *Bryan v. McPherson*, 590 F. 3d 767, 778 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2009)

<sup>9</sup> In the Shadows of the War on Terror: Persistent Police Brutality and Abuse of People of Color in the United States, Ritchie, A., Mogul, J., 2007