

**To our readers,**

The COVID-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-century type story, ...  
[Click here to continue](#)

**Not Active** (Status: **Published**, Sep 08, 2016 10:00 - Sep 22, 2016 10:00)

*Updated*

## Special Operations Group officers no longer carry guns in prison

By Jordan Bailey | Sep 08, 2016



The Special Operations Group in October 2015.

*Courtesy of: Maine State Prison*

Special Operations Group officers at Maine State Prison stopped carrying firearms while patrolling the prison after a department review of the policy found it to be against American Correctional Association standards.

Formed in 2013, the Special Operations Group, is a team of 20 correctional officers across the Department of Corrections who have volunteered to receive special training in corrections-based security.

Since November 2015, Maine State Prison has had a two-member SOG patrol daily. Officers in full gear, including Keltec KSG shotguns loaded with less-than-lethal ammunition — rubber bullets or sandbag rounds — and accompanied by dogs, assist correctional officers in the high-security close custody unit, rove the facility, and oversee mass movements of inmates. Before the Special Operation Group was formed, officers had not been allowed to carry firearms inside the fenced perimeter of the prison.

Opponents of the program argue that a military-style presence could increase tensions or have a negative effect on inmates with mental illness or PTSD and that the low level of violence at MSP did not warrant the patrols. They also raised safety concerns — an inmate might get hold of a weapon, and less-than-lethal rounds could become lethal at close range.

Supporters say the SOG's presence acts as a deterrent to violent acts by inmates. Trained and equipped to work in small groups, DOC Assistant Commissioner Jody Breton said in January, they are able to respond to a crisis situation more efficiently and effectively, from a distance, than the manpower-heavy Corrections Emergency Response Team, armed with only batons, shields and mace, which SOG replaced.

Gary LaPlante, director of operations for the department, said Tuesday that DOC staff charged with auditing prison policies against accreditation standards found an American Corrections Association standard which disallows carrying firearms in correctional facilities, except in emergency situations.

"During our own internal evaluation we discovered the standard, and as a result of that we looked at alternative methods," he said.

He said shotguns are still available to the officers for emergencies, but they carry TASERs instead for routine patrolling. He said the policy change occurred about three weeks ago.

Some inmates believe the SOG officers "had their guns taken away" because of recent incidents in which the officers fired their weapons. Prisoner James Manley said Thursday, Sept. 1, that a memo was circulated stating that a review of the SOG program determined the firearms to be unnecessary, due to cooperation of the inmates.

"But everyone knows the real reason it happened," he said. He described one incident in the close custody unit in which a rubber bullet ricocheted off the floor and hit an inmate in the head, and a second in which an officer fired during a fight in the chow hall when there were other inmates present. He said both had been called accidental misfires.

"I mean you can't accidentally [fire]," he said, "unless you have your finger on the trigger and the safety is off. That's the only way it's gonna fire," he said.

When asked about the incidents, LaPlante said he "never even heard of the first one," and as for the chow-hall fight, "it had no impact on this decision."

"I would call that a coincidence," he said. "We were doing an internal audit"

Inmate Calvin Wiggins, also interviewed Sept. 1, described the misfire in the chow hall, which he said happened in early August:

“I was sitting at the table when two guys started fighting. It was just a regular fight. The officer came over with the mace, sprayed ‘em and that was enough. Then this guy comes rushing in, gung-ho. He could have really hurt somebody, too, cause he tripped and discharged. Oh, he was afraid, one of the two [officers], cause there was no need to [fire]. Luckily it hit the wall, it didn't hit anybody, because those bullets, they put chunks in concrete.”

SOG Commander Mark Clevette said in an interview in January that he trains SOG officers to be professionals and be a presence, and that officers who exhibit aggressive tendencies in training are dropped from the program.

"You're not going in there to be tough guys," he tells SOG trainees.

Two inmates alleged excessive use of force by one SOG officer who no longer works at the prison.

The Courier-Gazette submitted a freedom of access request for video surveillance footage of the incident described by these inmates, which was denied. We pointed out that a Superior Court judge, in *Brady v. County of Cumberland*, ruled that surveillance footage inside a correctional center involving excessive use of force by a correctional officer was public, but have not yet received a reply. The Courier-Gazette also requested the final disciplinary letters for officers involved. The request was approved Aug. 23, but the department has not yet provided the letters or confirmed that there are any.

When SOG began its daily patrols in November, Breton said the department hoped to see a decrease in violent incidents at the prison. “If the incidents do not go down, we'll reassess,” she said at the time.

LaPlant said according to a recent survey of prisoners and staff, "Taking both together, there has been an overall improvement in how safe people feel at the facility since the implementation of the high risk security patrol." According to incident mapping data over that time period, he said, the instances of violence have stayed "pretty level." Violence is down from several years ago, he said, and there have not been any significant incidents this past year.

*Correction: An earlier version of this story included inmates' allegations against former correctional officer Nathan Staples. The allegations were not confirmed by official sources at the time of publication, because Knox Unified Court Clerks said there was no case under the name Smith v. Department of Corrections. The case files were later found at and that case is detailed in [another article](#).*

*If you appreciated reading this news story and want to support local journalism, consider subscribing today.  
Call (207) 594-4401 or join online at [waldo.villagesoup.com/join](http://waldo.villagesoup.com/join).  
Donate directly to keeping quality journalism alive at [waldo.villagesoup.com/donate](http://waldo.villagesoup.com/donate).*

---

Comments (0)

---