

TO: Police Chiefs
Public Safety Directors
Fund Commissioners
Risk Managements Consultants

FROM: Chief Keith F. Hummel (Ret.)

TOPIC: Firearms and Holster Safety
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There are several specialized tools that are issued to our law enforcement colleagues. Firearms are one of those tools, and the need to keep in mind their destructive potential should be on the mind of every officer while carrying and deploying this equipment. Safe gun handling on and off duty, training, and holster selection all play an important role in mitigating the risks that are inherent in using firearms.ⁱ

Leaders need to remind officers that “Complacency Kills” and to focus on the principle of “What’s Important Now.”ⁱⁱ Key among these principles is staying focused on the task at hand and remembering that we are dealing with a tool that can easily cause serious bodily injury or death to ourselves or another.

Check the internet or claims files to read about incidents that involve the accidental discharge of a firearm. Remember, we are not criticizing those who have suffered injuries or lost their lives, but we need to learn from those mistakes so that we do not repeat them over and over again. To ignore these outcomes would be irresponsible.ⁱⁱⁱ

Cases worth noting in New Jersey; an officer was cleaning their firearm in a school, the firearm discharged, in another case an officer was cleaning a firearm in headquarters, the firearm accidentally discharged, and the officer lost his life. Other cases show that accidental discharges resulted in a family member being seriously injured and in a more recent case, an eight-year-old child lost her life because the officer’s firearm was left unsecured.

Four Basic Rules to remember at all times:

1. Treat all firearms as if they are loaded
2. Never point a firearm at anything you are not willing to destroy
3. Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on target and you have made the decision to shoot
4. Be sure of your target and what is beyond it

Making Decisions:

Firearms – agency leaders, trainers, and designated front line personnel should be involved in the process of choosing a firearm. Input from this group is advisory, and the Chief of Police is responsible for making the final determination, as they will be held accountable for the choices that were made. The

working group should conduct an assessment to determine which firearm will work best for their agency. Scan for reliable information, obtain a copy of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's most recent tests on firearms and ammunition performance. Contact other agencies that have gone through a process and gather as much information as you can to help with the selection process.^{iv} Contact firearms vendors and test fire the weapons. Research the manufacturer's web site to determine if the firearm has any recalls or voluntary safety recalls or upgrades.

Other considerations the working group may want to explore; grip safeties, drop safety mechanisms, ammunition capabilities (+P Ammo), magazine safety disconnects, and the availability of commercially made security holsters.

Firearms come in several configurations, and each configuration has positives and negatives.

- Single Action Pistols - the exposed hammer of the firearm is placed in a cocked position, and the operator must manually use the safety to engage the firearms internal safeties.
- Double action / single action pistols – the pistol has an exposed hammer, but the hammer is placed in the double-action position by a safety or decocker mechanism. The double-action mode creates a long trigger pull that usually takes approximately 12 lbs. of force to activate. After the first shot, the hammer goes into a single-action mode and only requires 4-6 lbs. of force to activate the trigger.
- Striker Fired Pistols* – the firing pin acts as a striker, the striker is held back internally in a ready to fire position, when the trigger is pulled the tension is released, and the firing pin strikes the bullet's primer. Do not use a trigger lock mechanism on a loaded striker fired pistol! The trigger lock may push the trigger back and cause the firearm to discharge.

***Some manufacturers require the pistol's trigger to be pulled to disassemble the firearm. Officers need training and constant reminders (toolbox talks/shift briefings) on how the disassembly process should be carried out. Make sure that the firearm is pointed in a safe direction, remove the magazine, pull the slide back to the rear in a safe manner to empty the chamber, visually check the chamber, and the pistols internal mag well to ensure that the firearm is empty. Release the slide and then pull the trigger to move forward with disassembling the firearm. Reversing the process of pulling the slide back first and then removing the magazine may create a catastrophic event.**

Personnel should not be permitted to modify the weapons configuration, which includes barrels, grips, safety mechanisms, sites, or trigger weight without the permission of the Chief of Police or their designee.

Holsters – agency leaders, trainers, and designated front line personnel should be involved in the process of choosing a holster. Input from this group is advisory, and the Chief of Police is responsible for making the final determination, as they will be held accountable for the choices that were made. The working group should conduct an assessment to determine which holsters meet the agency's needs.

For a good explanation on Holster retention levels, visit the Safariland website:

<https://www.safariland.com/on/demandware.static/-/Sites-tsg-Library/default/dw6d72b654/resources/holsters-and-gear/Levels%20of%20Retention%20Details.pdf>

When choosing a holster, the agency should take into consideration the following:

- Purpose of the holster, on-duty uniform, on-duty plainclothes, or off duty wear.
- Was the holster designed to fit the firearm the agency chose? Universal holsters are strongly discouraged. They tend to be loose-fitting, and the retention devices fail to keep the firearm in the holster securely.
- Does the holster cover the firearms trigger guard? A completely covered trigger guard greatly reduces the potential for an accidental discharge of a properly holstered firearm. Uncovered trigger guards expose the trigger to fingers, clothing, and other equipment; allowing for the possibility of the trigger to be pressed and an accidental discharge taking place. For this reason, covered trigger guards are strongly recommended.
- Off-duty holsters should be designed for the officer's firearm and inspected by the agency for safety and fit. The holster should have a trigger guard.
- Holster wear – user's should inspect their holsters for signs of damage or excessive wear. Firearms instructors should check each officer's holster at least once a year during annual firearms qualifications. Make sure that all of the screws on the holster are properly tightened, the straps and retention devices work smoothly. Look for broken tabs and or retention devices. If the weapon is not secure in the holster, and there is excessive movement of the firearm in the holster, the officer should contact the firearms instructor for assistance. The testing of the holster should be done with an unloaded firearm!

Once a decision is made as to which firearm will best meet the needs of the agency and its personnel, proper training with the firearm and the holster should be completed before the officer uses the gun for duty.

Going through a decision making process with the goal of keeping safety a priority will lead to a better outcome. Equipment purchases, training, and keeping focus on what is important now will mitigate the risks that are inherent in the use of firearms.

Stay Safe!

Resources:

ⁱ The Complete Guide to Gun Safety. <http://aliengearholsters.com>. 2019.

ⁱⁱ The 5 Tenants of Below 100. www.Below100.org. 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 5 tenants of Below 100. www.Below100.org. 2019.

^{iv} 6 Considerations for selecting a new duty weapon. <https://www.policeone.com/police-products/firearms/handguns/articles/483702006-6-considerations-for-selecting-a-new-duty-weapon/>. 2019.

Other Sources:

Levels of Retention. The Safariland Group. <https://www.safariland.com/holsters-and-gear-resources/holster-retention-levels.html>. 2019