

Out in Force: Bullet-Proof Vests Lauded: Safety gear proves its worth

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Police say the weekend shooting of an officer who was saved by his vest is reason enough to wear one.

Success stories such as that of rookie police Officer Scott Osborn, whose bullet-proof vest saved his life this weekend, are why most officers wear their vests on every call, police said Monday.

"The large majority of officers wear them, and we strongly encourage them to wear them," Chief Dave Been said.

The vests' routine use is not mandatory in the Tulsa Police Department; however, Tulsa officers are required to wear them while serving search warrants, Been said.

He said traffic stops, such as the one Osborn was making when he was shot early Sunday, are among police officers' most dangerous duties.

Osborn had stopped a car that apparently was driving left of center near the Heatherstone Apartments, 9730 E. 33rd St., about 1:30 a.m.

The officer noticed the driver, Everardo Valencia-Tadeo, 36, waving his arms out the driver's side window, reports show. Osborn then saw Valencia-Tadeo drop his right hand, so the officer started to retreat.

He then heard shots and realized that he had been shot in the chest, Valencia-Tadeo's arrest report states.

Osborn broadcast a description of the shooter as he took cover and the car sped away.

Police captured Valencia-Tadeo a short time later as he was walking near the 3200 block of South 101st East Avenue and recovered a 9 mm semiautomatic handgun from his pants pocket, the arrest report states.

Osborn identified Valencia-Tadeo as the man who had shot him, and Valencia-Tadeo was booked into the Tulsa Jail on a complaint of shooting with an intent to kill.

The officer was taken to St. John Medical Center for observation but was released a short time later.

Osborn was hired by the city in January and graduated from the police academy this summer, records show.

Been, a police officer for more than 35 years, said many improvements and modifications have been made over the years to the vests law enforcement officers wear.

"When we were first issued vests in the late '70s, they were like cardboard and were virtually impossible to wear," he said.

Officers would take them to a saddlery to have them cut down so they could move their arms while wearing them, he said.

In the early 1980s, Been spent his own money to buy a more-comfortable vest, he said.

The goal of making vests more comfortable has not always been compatible with making them more efficient.

About a decade ago, bullet-proof vest manufacturers started replacing the Kevlar material in the vests with Zylon, a material produced by Toyobo Co. of Japan. The new material made the vests more comfortable, flexible and light, Maj. Paul Williams said.

"They did that over a period of three to five years, and then there were a couple of failures with the vests," he said. "What they determined is that the Zylon degraded over time and caused the failures."

In 2000, Tulsa police began using a Zylon vest that was manufactured by Second Chance Body Armor. When the problems started surfacing, Tulsa authorities began working to improve their vests' safety.

The department immediately obtained reinforcement panels to put in officers' vests and started replacing all of the vests, a process that Williams said took about two years.

The department received \$543,120 in April from Toyobo in a class-action lawsuit. That money went into a fund that will cover routine vest-replacement costs for about the next four years, Williams said.