**Detroit police overhaul gets federal scrutiny Melendez**



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The police officer known as "Robocop" has been sued at least four times for excessive use of force, cost the city more than $1 million in legal settlements, and received more resident complaints than any other in the city. Another officer has shot at suspects nine times in 10 years on the job, killing three and wounding several others.

Federal investigators had obvious places to start when they launched their probe into the Detroit Police Department at the end of 2000.

The process so far has resulted in two of the most sweeping consent decrees in the nation. In June, the city agreed with the U.S. attorney's office here to bring in an outside monitor for at least five years and to overhaul almost every unit in the department, as well as scores of policies and procedures.

But the probe isn't over yet.

A week after Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick agreed to improve everything from the way the department investigates officer-involved shootings to the food it serves detainees, U.S. Attorney Jeffrey Collins indicted 17 officers for allegedly waging a private war on residents they deemed undesirable.

The group, allegedly headed by William "Robocop" Melendez, is accused of stealing guns, money and drugs from suspects, planting weapons and breaking into homes without search warrants, among other crimes.

More indictments, authorities say, are on the way.

Unlike Los Angeles and several other jurisdictions, where federal monitors arrived to very cold welcomes, Kilpatrick and Police Chief Jerry Oliver have publicly welcomed oversight of the department.

"Detroit will never be a major player until the police department is a major, respected police department in this country," Oliver said at a news conference announcing the decrees. "There will never be a Renaissance here without it."

Many believe Detroit's best-intentioned public officials could not retool the 4,000-person department without help and pressure from the outside.

"Detroit politics is ossified -- it's hard to make changes through the normal political process,," said Peter Henning, a law professor at Wayne State University and a former federal prosecutor. "How often do you see an investigation that says your police department is in almost complete disrepair, and the mayor and police chief say thank you?"

A decade after then-Police Chief William Hart was convicted of looting a secret police fund and sent to federal prison, most officers seem to agree that the department -- not unlike the city -- long has been in decay.

Detroit lost 1 million residents, half its population, between 1950 and 2000, and the long-sought renaissance to which Oliver referred has been limited to a small section of downtown.

Officers here face some of the highest violent-crime levels in the nation, according to FBI statistics, while their colleagues in adjacent suburbs face some of the lowest.

As the scope of the consent agreement has become clear -- compliance will cost the city tens of millions of dollars -- and with prosecutors pledging more investigations, police supporters have begun railing against the U.S. attorney's office. And officers are blasting Oliver, whom Kilpatrick brought in last year to clean house.

Even as Oliver was praising the consent decrees, the police union was preparing a series of ads that accuse the new chief of not supporting his officers.

Among nearly 200 fundamental changes listed in the consent decrees is an order for the city to implement a computer database to track disciplinary problems, a type of system now common in most major cities.

The federal government also mandated that a new use-of-force policy address issues that are well-defined in most large-city departments, including when deadly force is permissible.

Preliminary reports by federal investigators found that the department does not even define "use of force," and that the majority of officers do not carry a baton -- employing instead just two tools that are far apart on the continuum, chemical spray and a gun. "This limited array of force options may lead to the use of excessive force in situations where chemical spray may be an inappropriate option but the use of deadly force is not justified," one report said.

The second consent decree, which focuses on what happened to people after they were arrested or detained by Detroit police, lists similarly startling problems.

Suspects and inmates awaiting court appearances are held for months in detention cells that were designed to hold people for a matter of hours, investigators said, adding that the department unconstitutionally detains witnesses indefinitely -- especially in homicide cases.

Working with federal authorities as the review progressed, Detroit police officials have begun revising the use-of-force and arrest procedures; new policies on detention and the renovation of holding facilities come next.

"Urban Detroit is a tough place to be a cop, believe me," said one veteran officer who asked that his name not be used. "Of course there are problems. This is not the best police department in the country, unfortunately. But now we're all suspects, to the feds, our own chief, the mayor, the people."

Weighing especially heavily on the minds of Detroit officers are the 17 indictments.

Some of those officers allegedly stopped groups of people on the street and searched them for drugs. If they found drugs or guns, the officers would pick and choose whom to arrest, falsifying reports to explain their actions, or pocket the contraband and money and allow the suspects to walk away. If they found no contraband, they sometimes planted it, the indictment alleges.

That's what happened, Darrell Chancellor says, when Melendez and another officer stopped him and a friend late on the night of April 22, 2002. The officers planted guns and arrested the pair, Chancellor contends in a lawsuit.

Chancellor spent 213 days in jail on weapons charges. When federal prosecutors looked at the case, they swiftly dismissed the charges.

(Begin optional trim)

Chancellor, 21, had a criminal record for receiving stolen property and a drug arrest, and he was well-known to Melendez, according to his attorney, Ronnie Cromer.

"The feds would never dismiss a case with these details -- except they didn't believe the officers," Cromer said. "Some of these officers have had complaints against them for years, dozens and dozens of complaints, and the department has done nothing."

(End optional trim)

Melendez and the other officers, three of whom also have earned precinct Officer of the Year awards, have been released on bond.

As with most of the other indicted officers, Melendez's primary accuser is a man with a felony record; said Melendez's attorney, David Lee, "You have to consider the source."

The monitor to oversee the consent decree has not been named, but federal officials say attorney Sheryl Robinson, 37, of the New York-based risk-assessment firm Kroll Inc. will have the job. Robinson's boss, Kroll president Michael Cherkasky, is the monitor overseeing the implementation of consent-decree reforms at the Los Angeles Police Department.

Robinson is preparing a team to help with the oversight. Police here are preparing for change.

"I'm not happy to have someone looking over my shoulder telling me how to do my job," said Deputy Chief Cara Best. "But whether I like it or not, we have two consent decrees. The Detroit Police Department is made up of thousands of good police officers. They just need some direction."

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