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local news

Some local law enforcement have fallen on wrong side of the law

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Instead of making arrests, several local officers and deputies have ended up in handcuffs themselves over the past year and a half.

Police blotters have recorded an unfortunate succession of alleged bad deeds by cops: sexual assault, theft, vandalism, engaging in prostitution and DUI.

The arrests raise questions: about training, about how officers are selected, about temptations to abuse the badge and about how law enforcement agencies are dealing with these issues.

Kern County's top commanders are dismayed.

"If you have to train someone not to have sex with an inmate, if you have to train someone not to pull people over and steal their money, we're really in trouble," said Kern County Sheriff Donny Youngblood. "Those really aren't training issues; those are criminal issues and we deal with those very harshly."

When an officer is arrested, it has an impact on the entire department, said Bakersfield Police Chief Greg Williamson.

"Obviously it goes right to the morale of the men and women who work day in and day out to serve the public and uphold that oath they took when they signed on to become a public servant," he noted.

The allegations

Former sheriff's deputy Jason Hammack was accused of pulling over motorists without cause and stealing money from their wallets. Hammack pleaded no contest in March to felony grand theft from a person and making an arrest without authority and faces up to a year in jail at his sentencing April 21.

Sheriff's Sgt. Vince Martinez is being investigated on allegations he may have compromised a possible case of elder financial abuse after he began dating the suspect's daughter.

Former Bakersfield police officer Albert Smith Jr. was charged this month with engaging in acts of prostitution both while on and off duty. He has pleaded not guilty.

Scott Drewry, another Bakersfield police officer, left the department after he was charged with misdemeanor vandalism.

And a case regarding the 2005 death of an inmate in the downtown jail finally came to a close in January 2010 when former detentions deputy Ralph Contreras was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 15 years to life in prison. Another former detentions deputy, Daniel Lindini, was sentenced to two years in prison for involuntary manslaughter in inmate James Moore's death.

Murder charges against a third detentions deputy, Roxanne Fowler, were dropped when she pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor assault charge.

Lindini's conviction was upheld in March.

Cops, critics

While top cops say they make sure to root out any lawbreakers in their departments, skeptics worry not enough is being done.

"It's unbelievable what goes on," said local attorney and frequent police critic Kathleen Faulkner. "Maybe they're making more arrests than they used to, but there have been some things going on for a long time."

Part of the problem, Faulkner said, is there's no independent investigation into alleged criminal activities on the part of local law enforcement.

Kern Sheriff Youngblood said his department is diligent when it comes to making sure a deputy accused of crossing the line is investigated.

"If it's a criminal investigation, we don't treat it any differently if it's a deputy than if it's anyone else," Youngblood said.

Sometimes someone who doesn't live up to the standards set by the department slips through, Youngblood said.

The public, and all employees of the police department, expect officers who commit crimes to be held accountable,

Williamson said. Ethics and character are taught throughout academy training, and it's incumbent upon the department to continually remind officers of the expectations, he said.

That happens not only during inservice training, but also at least a couple of times a month when Williamson sends out reports and articles to department staff regarding character and ethics. Those articles include instances where officers in other departments have fallen short.

Diop Kamau, founder of the Police Complaint Center in Washington, D.C., an organization that provides assistance to victims of police misconduct, said officers don't join a law enforcement agency planning to break the law. He said that, typically, it's a matter of an officer's values gradually eroding before they engage in illegal activity.

"Almost like how a mouse figures out which way to walk through a maze, they'll learn what the department will tolerate and how to cover things up," Kamau said.

A former police sergeant himself, Kamau said he saw firsthand how some of his fellow officers took advantage of the public. They knew if someone complained no one would believe them because it would be the officer's word against the victim's.

Such a scenario came into play in Kern when Hammack pulled over and stole from illegal immigrants, knowing they'd be reluctant to report the crime.

Kamau recommended that citizens report unusual contacts with officers, even incidents that don't result in arrests. And officers need to hold everyone in their department accountable and turn in an officer who's breaking the law.

"They need to take an active hand in policing each other," Kamau said.

'Held to a higher standard'

Faulkner said internal affairs investigators look into complaints against officers to determine if there was wrongdoing, and they're going to look out for the interests of the department.

"They're pals, and they feel like they're in it together," she said.

There are about 2,000 total employees between the Bakersfield Police Department and the sheriff's department, Youngblood said. The officers and deputies who have been arrested represent only a tiny part of the overall law enforcement population, and the vast majority obey and enforce the law, both Youngblood and Williamson have said.

"No one wants to weed out the bad apples more than the good apples," Youngblood said.

He said the public should be concerned if law enforcement wasn't doing anything about those few officers who stray from the law. But they're investigated and prosecuted.

"We all know that we should be held to a higher standard," Youngblood said.

Williamson said much the same.

"Not only does the public have high expectations, but 99 percent of officers in the field have that expectation that we all should be held accountable to a higher standard of behavior," Williamson said.



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