

City to pay \$575,000 to settle LAPD sex abuse case

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A woman who accused two Los Angeles police officers of threatening her with jail unless she had sex with them will be paid \$575,000 to drop her lawsuit against the city.

The City Council voted unanimously Wednesday to approve the payout to the woman, whom LAPD investigators believe is one of at least four women James Nichols and Luis Valenzuela coerced into sex. The Times generally does not name alleged victims of sex crimes.

Nichols and Valenzuela, both 41, were working as narcotics detectives in Hollywood in 2010 when they arrested the woman, according to one of her attorneys, Dennis Chang, and a search warrant affidavit LAPD investigators filed as part of their criminal investigation into the officers' conduct.

The officers offered to help free the woman from custody as she awaited trial and win her a lenient sentence if she agreed to work for them as an informant on other investigations, according to Chang and the affidavit.

"Their power over her was abundantly clear from the get-go," Chang said.

Over the next year, Nichols and Valenzuela confronted the woman repeatedly, telling her they would no longer help her in her case unless she had sex with them, Chang and the affidavit said. She agreed, she told investigators, out of fear the officers would send her back to jail if she refused.

In March 2010, Valenzuela showed up at the woman's apartment when he was off duty and, several months later, had sex with her in the back seat of an unmarked undercover car when he was working, according to the affidavit. Nichols, the woman told investigators, brought her to a hotel and, on a later encounter, had sex with her in her apartment.

The officers used similar threats on three other woman who also worked for them as informants or knew the officers from previous arrests, the affidavit showed. One of the alleged victims said the two officers pulled up alongside her in a Volkswagon Jetta as she was walking her dog in Hollywood. The officers, whom she recognized as the same cops who had arrested her previously, ordered her into the car, according to the affidavit.

The woman said she felt compelled to comply. Valenzuela, she said, got into the back seat with the woman and handed her dog to Nichols, who drove the car to a more secluded area. "Why don't you cut out that tough girl crap," the woman recounted Valenzuela saying as he forced her to perform oral sex on him, according to police records contained in the warrant.

The woman who filed the lawsuit was “pleased to get it behind her,” Chang said. “She was not excited to have to go through a trial.”

Attorneys for the officers could not be reached. In an earlier interview, Nichols’ attorney, Robert Rico, said the woman and the other accusers “had no credibility.”

Valenzuela, a 16-year department veteran, and Nichols, who has been an officer for 13 years, are awaiting disciplinary hearings, where it will be decided whether to fire them. City prosecutors, meanwhile, are reviewing the case to decide whether to file criminal charges, a spokeswoman for the district attorney’s office said.

LAPD Chief Charlie Beck declined to comment on the settlement, citing the on-going internal proceedings against the officers. “The department will do the right thing, even if these officers didn’t,” he said.

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