

The New Orleans Police Department, besieged with a host of scandals over the past year and grappling with a rising tide of violent crime, a severe manpower crisis and the challenges associated with implementing a federally mandated consent decree, now finds itself in the spotlight again for all the wrong reasons, Vocativ.com reported in a story dated May 15. A recent investigation by WDSU News has revealed that two veteran NOPD officers who are currently awaiting trial for felonies are back on the job after 120-day suspensions.

NOPD Officer Bradley Wax, 54, was arrested at his Mandeville, La. home in April 2014 and charged with possessing 38 counts of child pornography.

Despite the seriousness of those charges or the fact that the crime carries a possible punishment of up to 500 years in prison, he's still on the payroll and working at NOPD headquarters.

Officer Michael Thomassie, 40, was charged in February 2014 with aggravated rape. Prosecutors say the alleged victim was under the age of 10 at the time of the crime. Thomassie is working as a desk-cop in the NOPD's Fourth District.

NOPD spokesman Tyler Gamble told WDSU News that regardless of the charges, the department's hands are tied until there are verdicts, which are expected this summer. Without proof of guilt, the 120-day suspension (unpaid) is the most severe punishment available.

"An emergency suspension is generally used as a tool for emergency situations when an officer has been arrested and is physically unable to come to work and perform their duties," the NOPD said in a statement to WDSU after being asked why the two officers are still on the job despite facing felony charges.

"Once the officer is able to return to work, they are reassigned to administrative duties pending the outcome of an investigation. Based on civil service rules, officers are disciplined after an investigation is completed and a formal disciplinary hearing has been held."

Dr. John Penny, a criminologist at Southern University at New Orleans, told WDSU News that it's hard for him to understand why the NOPD would allow someone facing such serious charges to continue to work as law enforcement officers.

It's incredibly hard to imagine anyone in that capacity would be back working and being paid for it at taxpayer expense," Penny said.

Eric Hessler, a spokesman for the Police Association of New Orleans, told WDSU that even though Wax and Thomassie still wear the badge and wield the authority of the NOPD, "it's very rare they'll be interacting with the public in any fashion."

With Wax assigned to the fleet division and Thomassie pulling desk duty, concerns remain about

the two officers' presence on the job in the wake of felony arrests and indictments.

"It sends a very dangerous message to the citizens of this community," Penny told WDSU.

WDSU reported that NOPD Officer Ananie Mitchell, a member of the NOPD's Gang Task Force, was arrested in early March and charged with soliciting a prostitute — a misdemeanor—and placed on emergency suspension without pay.

But less than two months later he was back on the job, even though rules required reinstatement only after 120 days have passed. The NOPD declined to comment on the Mitchell case in detail, but said that he has been assigned to the mail room at NOPD headquarters.

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The initial reaction is, 'Oh my God,'" said Rebecca Rainey with the Metropolitan Center for Women and Children.

Rainey said she understands the tough position the city is in, but she believes there's a real risk in having officers on the job while under indictment.

"I would like to think in any work environment there is a fine line and a liability when you bring them back," she said.

"The appropriate action was taken; now you step back from that and put them, back to work and pay them, and it sends an incredibly dangerous message," Penny said.

Lawyers for all three officers told WDSU that their clients are all innocent and plan to prove that in court.

NOPD spokesman Tyler Gamble told WDSU that the department's manpower shortage was not a factor in the three officers returning to their jobs after being indicted.

Last year the NOPD was rocked by a scandal that resulted from an Office of Inspector General report that said five detectives from the Special Victims Section failed to follow up on 86 percent of the calls reporting sexual assault between 2011 and 2013.

Some of the cases involved underage children.

City leaders, NOPD officials and the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Office said the five detectives and their supervisors could potentially face termination or criminal prosecution.

The NOPD was also rocked by another scandal that resulted from an incident during which an officer turned off her body camera before shooting a suspect in the head. The incident went unreported for two days and is believed to have cost former NOPD Supt. Ronal Serpas his job.

He unexpectedly announced his retirement shortly after the incident and is now teaching at Loyola University.

In other NOPD-related news, the French Quarter got an added layer of protection last week as 20 members of a new civilian police force were deployed by the City of New Orleans, FOX 8 News reported

NOLA Patrol will handle quality-of-life issues in the French Quarter but will not carry guns. The civilian officers are trained to handle a number of non-emergency issues like traffic enforcement and loitering. City leaders and NOPD officials hope the new patrol will free NOPD officers to deal with more serious issues.

Members of NOLA Patrol will wear uniforms, but their uniforms will be different than NOPD officers.

After five weeks and 200 hours of training, the NOPD recently graduated 20 members of the group.

The program was proposed by Mayor Mitch Landrieu last year and approved by city council in November. Funding for the patrol comes from the city's hospitality industry in the form of a voluntary hotel tax.

The program has stirred controversy. Supporters say the patrols will help deter crime by adding more uniformed security presence, while critics argue the focus should be on hiring more armed officers.

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