

# Council OKs Settlement in Slaying Cases

■ **Suits:** City will pay \$2.15 million to families of two killed by LAPD officer. Lax handling of domestic violence is cited.

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The Los Angeles City Council on Friday reluctantly agreed to pay \$2.15 million to settle a pair of lawsuits after learning that police officials did little to reprimand an officer who assaulted his estranged wife months before he killed her and her boyfriend.

Council members said they felt compelled to settle the suits after being told that additional evidence at the upcoming trial would show that the Los Angeles Police Department had a practice of handling domestic violence cases involving officers within the department instead of referring those cases for criminal prosecution.

"You can't expect to enforce the law when you don't enforce it among your own. It's intolerable," said Councilman Richard Alatorre.

"Clearly what has been happening is part of the law enforcement culture, not pursuing it," said Councilwoman Laura Chick, who heads the Public Safety Committee.

"In years past, there wasn't a zero-tolerance message coming from government and society," she said. "We held our nose and voted for this settlement."

According to court documents, which were discussed with the council in closed session, there was a five-year period, ending in 1992, during which as many as 62 officers were involved in domestic violence allegations investigated by the LAPD, but none of the officers were arrested.

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# SETTLE: City to Pay \$2.15 Million

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Former LAPD Assistant Chief David Dotson declared in a sworn statement that officers were not prosecuted for domestic violence because of an unwritten "practice that the department maintained of using internal disciplinary measures to handle such complaints, rather than the criminal justice system."

After approving payment of the settlement Friday, the council called on LAPD officials to report at a public hearing on how the department now handles incidents of domestic abuse within its ranks.

Cmdr. Tim McBride said the department has taken a much more proactive approach over the last year and now refers such cases to appropriate prosecuting agencies for review in every instance. However, McBride said statistics cited in court documents may be misleading because they don't take into account when a victim recants, or when evidence falls short of supporting a criminal referral.

"The whole world is treating domestic violence cases differently today," McBride said. "There's more sensitivity to the issue now

and the patterns of abuse that need to be broken." Inspector General Katherine Mader, who is the civilian watchdog over department internal affairs matters, agreed with McBride.

"The issue is not whether more police officers should be prosecuted, it's whether there's an independent prosecuting agency reviewing the cases rather than having them reviewed in-house," Mader said.

Councilwoman Chick said she is concerned with how incidents of domestic violence are handled in the department's internal discipline process. While LAPD officers convicted of a felony are automatically fired, she said, those who are convicted of misdemeanors sometimes get as little as two days' suspension or a small fine.

Despite their concerns, council members voted Friday to pay \$1.5 million to the family of Melba Terre Ramos and \$650,000 to the family of Gregory Rico Thomas; both were killed by LAPD Officer Victor Felix Ramos before he shot himself.

Attorney Gregory A. Yates, who

handled the suits, said the settlements were formally approved by federal Magistrate Carolyn Turchin late Friday.

According to a city report on the settlement, officer Ramos pointed his city-issued weapon at his wife, Melba Ramos, during a violent argument at her workplace in May 1992. Ramos' weapons were seized but were returned to him in June 1992 after he visited a police psychologist, the report says, noting that department policy on returning weapons was not followed.

Ramos killed his estranged wife and Thomas when he found them in bed together Aug. 12, 1992, the report says.

The families of each victim sued separately. A jury in the Thomas case found the city partially at fault and ordered a judgment of about \$650,000. Appeals through the state Supreme Court have been rejected, officials said Friday.

A federal lawsuit by Melba Ramos' three children and her parents was scheduled for trial Feb. 25.

Voting against the settlement Friday were council members Nate Holden and Joel Wachs.