

LAPD to Review Domestic Abuse Investigations

■ **Probe:** Task force will examine handling of cases involving officers. Larger effort will determine how many may have to relinquish weapons under new federal law.

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The Los Angeles Police Department has formed a task force to review the department's handling of more than 80 internal investigations of officers allegedly involved in domestic abuse violations, authorities said Monday.

The probe of the internal investigations between 1987 and 1992 is part of a larger review to determine how many officers may have to relinquish their firearms because of a new federal gun control law that prohibits anyone convicted of domestic abuse crimes from carrying or owning a gun, authorities say.

"We're reviewing all of those cases to see if anything

different should have been done," Cmdr. Tim McBride said Monday. "We're going to look at how we investigated them and whether we did or did not refer them for possible prosecution."

The Times reported in February that during a five-year period ending in 1992, as many as 62 LAPD officers were involved in domestic abuse accusations investigated by the LAPD. None of those officers were arrested. Another 23 LAPD officers were investigated for alleged domestic abuse by other law enforcement agencies, with nine of the officers arrested.

The cases include allegations of LAPD officers having slugged, pushed, choked or bitten their wives or girlfriends.

Former LAPD Assistant Chief David Dotson has declared in a sworn court statement that during the same five-year period, LAPD 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."

Because of those cases and Dotson's testimony, city officials agreed in February to pay \$2.15 million to settle a pair of lawsuits stemming from a 1992 incident in which an LAPD officer killed his estranged wife and her boyfriend before fatally shooting himself. A month before the shooting, police officials became aware that the officer—Victor Felix Ramos—had previously pointed his gun at his wife and threatened to kill her. However, they did little to reprimand him.

Gregory A. Yates, the attorney who represented the plaintiffs in the lawsuits, said the department had a history of meting out little discipline for officers accused of domestic abuse.

Among the cases between 1987 and 1992 that he cited in court documents:

- An LAPD officer was accused of twisting both of his wife's arms, shoving her against the wall and biting her neck. The officers who investigated the incident witnessed the bite mark on her neck. The officer was neither arrested nor disciplined.

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"It is unfortunate that the department is placed in the middle of an ongoing marital dispute," a department official concluded.

• Another officer was accused by his wife of choking her into unconsciousness. Although a responding officer saw redness around the woman's neck, a department official said the redness "could not definitely" be attributed to the choking.

• A girlfriend of another officer said she was beaten, slugged in the eye and thrown to the ground by the officer, who also refused to let her use a telephone to call for assistance.

"After reviewing the results of this investigation I have determined that [the officer] did nothing improper," a department official concluded.

McBride said the task force will look into those cases and others as part of its review.

He added that there is now "a heightened awareness" within the department, as there is in society, about the seriousness of domestic abuse. For the past year, he said, the department has referred all allegations of domestic violence to prosecutors for review. Previously, such referrals were not always made, he said.

Although the statute of limitations has expired on most if not all of the 85 cases under review, the task force is looking for possible

problem officers so the department can be proactive in its attempts to deal with domestic abusers, officials said.

Despite the department's assurances that cases are now handled differently, some activists remain skeptical.

"I think it's still a problem," said Carol Sobel, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union. "All too often the department dismisses these kinds of cases. . . . The attitude is still that the victims must have done something to deserve it. When [domestic abuse] involves one of their own, they apply a difficult standard."

In addition to the 85 cases, the task force is reviewing a state Department of Justice list of officers who may have domestic abuse convictions and might therefore be prohibited under the new federal law from carrying firearms. The list contains some 200 names, but police officials said a preliminary review has found that it includes names of people who are not LAPD officers.

In some cases, the names resemble those of department employees but are not the same person. In others, the names are of job candidates who never joined the force.

Officers who have such convictions will probably be transferred from field assignments to desk jobs that don't require them to carry guns, authorities said. Department sources estimate about 30 to 40 officers may have their weapons revoked after the review is complete.