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Probe spurs demotion or ouster of 99 L.A. County reserve deputies

By ROBERT FATURECHI AND RICHARD WINTON, LOS ANGELES TIMES

MAY 28, 2010
12 AM



The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department has given reserve badges to people who flunked mandatory law enforcement tests and attended classes at unauthorized locations, including the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills, 20th Century Fox Studios and possibly a yacht, according to a state report released Thursday.

As a result, 99 reserve deputies are being stripped of their badges or demoted to lower-level volunteer status, authorities said.

Investigators with the state's Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training reviewed the operation of the department's reserve program from 2003 to 2008 and found significant problems in training and recordkeeping. In several cases, officials discovered that some course material and attendance records had been fabricated. On nine occasions, records showed an instructor teaching students at two locations at the same time.

According to the report, nearly 75% of the department's 847 reserve deputies did not meet the state's minimum training requirements as of December 2008. A sheriff's spokesman said most of those reserves have since been retrained to comply with state standards.

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The department's reserve deputies are paid just a dollar a year. Though they are granted badges, most are required to work under the supervision of full-time sworn deputies. Common tasks include administrative work, transporting of evidence and parking enforcement. Generally, only highly trained reserves are permitted to make on-duty arrests, sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore said.

The 99 reserves demoted or ousted were mostly businessmen and businesswomen. At least one is a celebrity, Whitmore said. State and sheriff's officials declined to identify the reserve deputies.

The department's reserve and training programs have had troubles in past years, including allegations that some well-connected supporters of Sheriff Lee Baca were given badges or other special favors.

In November 1999, the sheriff had to disband his "celebrity" reserve unit, a group of about 20 influential community members, after two members got into trouble with the law: one on money-laundering charges and the other for allegedly brandishing a weapon outside his home. In setting up the unit, sheriff's officials said, they rushed background checks on the reserves and reduced the training required for them.

More recently, in 2008, Baca had to order his academy to stop training new, full-time recruits until it addressed problems exposed by state inspectors. One instructor gave recruits the answers to their tests, and those who failed training courses were allowed to repeatedly retest until they passed.

In an interview Thursday with The Times, Baca dismissed any suggestion that the problems with the reserve program were motivated by an attempt to cozy up to fundraisers. He said the program exists to save tax dollars by embracing volunteers who are willing to work without a salary.

He said classes were held at different locations because the county's traffic gridlock made it difficult for trainees to attend courses at state-approved academies and colleges.

Baca said that the problems identified by the state investigators have been addressed and that a new class of volunteers will be graduating in June with all required certifications.

"We messed up," he said, "and I fixed it."

Internal affairs investigations are being conducted into two department officials involved with operating the reserves program, Whitmore said.

"We're moving forward," he said. "If any disciplinary action is determined to be necessary, it certainly will be made."

State officials said they launched the investigation in June 2008, in part because of numerous complaints from "individuals and agencies" that some trainees were receiving special treatment.

Investigators said "credible sources" alleged that one trainee passed a firearms test despite missing the target completely. In another case, trainees from a "special class" were allegedly given a lesser exposure to chemical agents during training than the other students.

Alan Deal, an assistant executive director at the Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training, said some trainees were given badges without any testing.

“There are some serious shortcomings here,” said Michael Gennaco, head of the county’s Office of Independent Review, which monitors the Sheriff’s Department. “People who violated policy will be held accountable.... It is unfortunate [that] deputies who did do the training here are going to have to be retrained.”

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