

Tracking Delays

A how-not-to guide for monitoring bad cops

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published: April 06, 2000

Prodding by the Department of Justice has elicited sudden interest at City Hall, but so far no satisfactory answers about why it has taken the Los Angeles Police Department and its civilian commission more than two years to spend a federal grant set aside for a key police-reform measure.

The \$163,492 -- first approved by the Department of Justice in September 1997 for a study to determine how to create a tracking system to identify potential "problem" officers -- was among the issues taken up by the Justice Department's Bill Lann Lee in mid-March during his inquiry into possible civil rights violations related to the Rampart Division scandal. The system was a central reform recommendation by the 1991 Christopher Commission. The LAPD currently has a rudimentary tracking system that provides a report so abbreviated that supervisors must drive downtown and search through files to construct a complete profile.

Key reform or not, there was little local scrutiny by the Mayor's Office or the City Council while the funds for the study remained unused through delays that included a months-long reorganization of the LAPD committee charged with grant oversight in 1997-98. But then two weeks ago, a sharply worded memo from Deputy Mayor Kelly Martin that coincided with the DOJ visit to Los Angeles, called the project "too important to delay any further" and shifted blame for delays to the City Council. Martin referred to a lengthy LAPD-supplied chronology of the grant's history that she said "explains why Governing Magazine graded Los Angeles 'C-' for "managing for results" and why charter reform was so necessary," a snipe at the council's opposition to the Riordan-driven revision effort.

Who's-to-blame provided the subtext at last week's council Public Safety Committee meeting where council members gloomily pondered the latest glitch in launching the study -- a snag in a bidding process that began in September 1998 and was on the way to completion last year until the City Administrative Office raised grave concerns about the selected vendor.

Sierra Systems, an Ottawa-based company that has a history of contracts with the LAPD, was recommended by the department in January 1999 and approved by the Police Commission and forwarded to the Mayor's Office that March. But the momentum stopped dead on July 1 when a CAO report pointed out that Sierra Systems was a year behind schedule and \$13 million over budget on a contract to computerize the city payroll system and recommended against hiring the company for the tracking-system study.

Council members were annoyed by mayoral criticism that they feel implied that they should have gone ahead with an inferior vendor. During last week's council committee hearing, Councilman Joel Wachs twice asked for clarification on the chronology of the grant, pointedly explaining that if the council was to be blamed for something, he had to understand what that something was.

And in interviews after the meeting, Mark Ridley-Thomas and Laura Chick both blamed the Mayor's Office for pushing aside police reform as a top priority in favor of a hiring campaign to fulfill Riordan's most high-profile campaign promise of building the LAPD to 10,000 officers.

"If reform had still been a top priority with this city as it relates to the police department, I believe that matter would have been taken care of," said Ridley-Thomas of the tracking system, adding that the record is clear that Riordan shifted the priority away from reform in his first months in office.

One issue that went largely unaddressed at the committee meeting was the seven months of inaction between August 1999 and now. Council insiders describe with exasperation the back-and-forth between city officials and the LAPD, with the department insisting that requests to seek a new vendor be put in writing; council staff admits that they did not do so. "We went through the normal process," argues Commander David Kalish of the LAPD. "Now, all of a sudden after all this process -- it's absolutely ludicrous to verbally say, "Pick someone else."

Last week's Public Safety Committee's action throws out the Sierra Systems bid and directs the City Administrative Office, the city attorney and the LAPD to start over and recommend a new contractor within two months.

"Is this not one of the prime examples . . . of why the Justice Department thinks that we are half-hearted about reform of the Los Angeles Police Department?" Ridley-Thomas asked impatiently at the committee meeting.

Indeed, the study is set to take six months, putting its conclusion in November at the earliest. The city must then apply for funds to create the system and then bid out that contract -- possibly a yearlong process -- then get the system up and running. Now that the Rampart scandal has put the issue of oversight under the microscope, the process could move more quickly than it otherwise might, but even at full speed the city is years away from a system. The computerized personnel management system at the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which was created with \$1 million in funds from narcotics forfeiture and \$3.5 million in departmental staff time, took five years to set up.

The lag time is not unexpected in a process that has been sandbagged by LAPD resistance and abetted by political apathy since the tracking system was first recommended in 1991. There was little action on the recommendation between 1991 and 1993, the year Chief Willie Williams, backed by then-Police Commissioners Gary Greenebaum and Art Mattox, made an interim budget request of \$122,576 to set up a complaint tracking system. It was turned down by the Mayor's Office in 1993 in favor of other budget priorities -- the primary goal at the time was fulfillment of Riordan's campaign promise to boost LAPD ranks to 10,000 officers.

In April 1994, the Police Commission, with the Christopher Commission still in mind and the embers of 1992 still cooling, squeezed some \$39,000 out of the commission's budget and hired a part-time systems analyst to assemble existing department databases into the Officer Behavioral Internal Tracking System, which went by the none-too-subtle acronym OBITS. It exists today as TEAMS, the system that provides the thumbnail behavioral profile available to LAPD supervisors.

Former Police Commission President Raymond C. Fisher noted the inadequacy of the report in 1996, and in January 1997, after rejecting the option of purchasing an off-the-shelf system, wrote to the Department of Justice to request the funds that are at issue now.

Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski, who chairs the Public Safety Committee, says she is willing to explore the off-the-shelf option rejected three years ago, even though some insiders worry that it will lead up yet another blind alley. But Miscikowski believes that the pressure of the Rampart crisis will overcome the historic institutional resistance to the system. "Now I can't believe there is anybody with any degree of credibility who is going to be able to shut it down. I think it's now going to get in place a whole lot sooner than previously suggested."