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Watchdog finds fault with how state troopers are trained

Troopers accused of assault or domestic violence are used as mentors, report says

BY: **SOPHIE NIETO-MUNOZ** - NOVEMBER 11, 2022 7:14 AM



 The report says some State Police training violates aspects of a 1999 consent decree that left the State Police under federal oversight for a decade over complaints of racial profiling. (Photo by Jamie Squire/Getty Images)

A review by a state watchdog found the New Jersey State Police's training bureau has cut mandated curriculum on the use of force, uses lesson plans from as long as 14 years ago, and employs troopers with a history of assault or domestic violence as mentors for recent police academy graduates.

The [report](#) released Thursday by the State Comptroller's Office – an independent agency overseeing the executive branch in the state – details how courses for troopers are inconsistent, underdeveloped, and taught by instructors with a “lack of interest in teaching.” The report questions why these instructors were even chosen, claiming some teachers have “problematic disciplinary histories.”

In one instance, the report states, a temporary instructor described lessons from the culture and diversity curriculum in “seemingly pejorative terms.” In another case, an instructor teaching a class on prejudice and discrimination reduced the course time by 25 minutes and left out a video on hate crimes.

The report says the training bureau is violating aspects of a 1999 consent decree that left the State Police under federal oversight for a decade over complaints of racial profiling.

“This report and others I've issued show the New Jersey State Police can do more to comply with both the letter and the spirit of the consent decree and to ensure constitutional policing. Effective training of troopers by dedicated instructors committed to this mission – by setting the right tone, discouraging racial profiling, and ensuring policies involving use of force are followed – is critical,” acting State Comptroller Kevin Walsh said in a statement.

In response to a draft of the report, representatives of the State Police acknowledged that the areas where training falls short “are of great concern” and said they are working to address them. They also agreed to review training materials and begin in-person audits for certain courses and said they would undertake a “meaningful review” of how instructors are trained.

The [1999 consent decree](#), approved by a judge after the U.S. Department of Justice sued the state for its high rate of traffic stops of Black drivers, required a host of reforms involving the management and operation of the State Police. When the consent decree was dissolved in 2009, the Legislature passed a law to ensure the agency continues following non-discriminatory practices and mandate regular reviews by the comptroller.

In line with the consent decree, troopers and new recruits should take regular courses in cultural diversity, communication, Fourth Amendment protections, integrity, and ethics, according to the law.

This marks the comptroller's eighth review of the State Police.

Lessons plans outdated, simplistic

Thursday's report says the State Police do not update lesson plans for new trooper training: One class had a 14-year delay between updates, and another had a 7-year delay.

State Police lesson plans don't go beyond low-level learning objectives, the report says. Troopers aren't taught to engage in deep levels of understanding outside the classroom settings, according to the report, which says as an example that trainees may be taught what racially influenced policing is, but are not taught how to apply it.

Lesson plans are wildly inconsistent depending on who is teaching them and are often cut short, the report says. A 90-minute lesson plan on handling people with special needs is likely too short for people to understand such a complex topic, according to the report. And many tests are true-or-false, which are “overly simplistic” and don’t sufficiently support student knowledge, the report says.

Criticism of instructors

The comptroller’s office finds particular fault with instructors in the training bureau.

About 20% of instructors are temporarily assigned from other units and are not required to undergo interviews, submit resumes, or provide writing samples, according to the report.

Of the 59 temporary instructors who taught from 2017 to 2022, 12 had pending or substantiated disciplinary investigations, and four had pending or substantiated Equal Employment Opportunity investigations while they were teaching new recruits.

The report also says mentors selected for new troopers often have “questionable” histories, including cops who were suspended for driving while intoxicated, assault, and falsifying reports.

Despite serious problematic histories, 131 people trained and mentored probationary troopers who had just graduated from the academy. Among the officers who mentored new troopers were a cop who was suspended for 508 days for domestic violence and disobeying a direct order, another who faced a 180-day suspension for inappropriate actions toward another trooper, and an officer who was suspended for 45 days for theft and an alcohol-related incident.

The comptroller’s office left the State Police with a list of 11 recommendations – and noted that the agency has yet to implement recommendations from past reviews.

Among the guidance:

- Modernize the curriculum and aim to provide increased depth of knowledge, perhaps by hiring civilian personnel to help develop lesson plans.
- Adopt policies requiring annual review of lesson plans, and document any changes.
- Increase the number of courses required to be observed by officials within the office of law enforcement professional standards.
- Interview all instructor candidates, including temporary ones, and refrain from recruiting troopers who haven’t expressed interest in teaching.
- Document the decision-making process for candidates who want to be mentors.
- Deliver mandated training in accordance with the attorney general’s requirements of training and do not remove or shorten exercises.

A spokesman for the State Police did not respond to a request for comment.



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