

State Police in N.J. ‘Weaponized’ Disciplinary Investigations, Reports Find

The state’s attorney general has seized control of the agency’s human resources and equal opportunity functions after investigations into racial and gender bias.



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By Tracey Tully

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New Jersey’s attorney general has ordered an overhaul of the internal affairs unit of the State Police and seized control of its human resources department after concluding that disciplinary investigations had been “weaponized” against some troopers.

The attorney general, Matthew J. Platkin, announced the restructuring on Tuesday as he released two scathing reports that detailed bias in the agency’s promotional policies and systemic flaws in its ability to police itself.

The reports, including a four-year, taxpayer-funded review by an outside law firm that conducted interviews with 150 troopers, offered an ugly glimpse into how New Jersey’s largest policing agency handled reports of racism and allegations of sexual misconduct.

“These investigations revealed deeply troubling conduct and systemic problems within the New Jersey State Police that demand reform,” Mr. Platkin said in a statement.

“There are favored members at the State Police, and some members hesitate to report discrimination or misconduct for fear of reprisals,” he added.

His office recommended more than two dozen policy changes, including disclosure of complaints made against senior State Police officers and alterations to its sick-leave policies and physical fitness tests that most often penalize women. He also ordered the

agency to restructure its academy training program.

The superintendent of the State Police, Col. Patrick Callahan, agreed to implement the recommendations. “We cannot allow these problems to tarnish the honor and fidelity that so many men and women in this uniform live by,” Colonel Callahan, who has led the department since late 2017, said in a statement.

The attorney general said his office had taken over all equal opportunity functions at the State Police and will embed staff members in the internal affairs unit, known as the Office of Professional Standards, to oversee the evaluation of complaints.

The public release of the reports and Mr. Platkin’s policy recommendations come a year after the Justice Department began conducting its own review of the New Jersey State Police.

Colonel Callahan was appointed acting superintendent in 2017 by former Gov. Chris Christie. Gov. Philip D. Murphy kept Colonel Callahan on when he took over the next year and later pressed for the officer’s appointment as superintendent.

The agency has had a storied but often troubled 103-year history.

It has been subject to two federal consent decrees, including one that lasted 10 years because of a documented pattern of racial profiling in highway traffic stops. In the last several years, more than 20 officers have filed lawsuits alleging racial and gender bias.

Last year, the New Jersey State Police employed 173 female officers — about 5 percent of its 3,264 troopers. The number of Black and Latino troopers has nearly doubled since 1998, but the force is still 73 percent white in a state that is among the most ethnically diverse in the Northeast.

An investigation conducted by the law firm Kaufman Dolowich concluded that the agency lacked diversity in its top ranks. Yet it also found that race, gender and age did not have a “statistically significant impact” on the number of promotions a trooper earned in the years evaluated, 2017 to 2021.

A separate review done by the attorney general’s Office of Public Integrity and Accountability highlighted two troubling incidents involving a retired lieutenant who had worked in the agency’s internal affairs unit.

After receiving an anonymous complaint that a trooper had made a racist comment about a senior Black officer, the lieutenant “squandered police resources” trying to identify the tipster rather than investigating the accuracy of the concern, according to the attorney general’s office.

The lieutenant obtained typewriter samples, video, gas records and fingerprints. Then, at the lieutenant’s urging, the Black officer who had been the reported target of the racist comment was brought up on bogus internal affairs charges.

In another case, the same lieutenant sent a text message to colleagues discussing the arrest of a trooper who had been charged with having sexual contact with a 14-year-old girl on a school sports trip. “Can we at least see a pic of her. I’d like to see what all the hubbub is about,” he wrote, according to the attorney general’s office.

None of the troopers who received the text message reported it.

All of them will be transferred out of the internal affairs unit.

This is a developing story.

Tracey Tully is a reporter for The Times who covers New Jersey, where she has lived for more than 20 years. More about Tracey Tully