

4 more Green Bay officers suspended in 2017

Doug Schneider Green Bay Press-Gazette
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

GREEN BAY – The number of Green Bay police officers suspended for various conduct violations in 2017 continues to grow.



Smith

Chief Andrew Smith issued unpaid suspensions last year to four officers whose names had not previously been made public, including two he ordered to take 15 days off without pay.



Wicklund

One of the four, Police Specialist Derek Wicklund, was also asked to sign what the city calls a “last-chance agreement” and relieved of his duties as a canine-handler in April

after he was disciplined for the second time in three months. The document is essentially one step from a termination request.

“It tells them basically that they have lost all their chances and any further serious misconduct in the future will result in me bringing charges asking for their removal by the Police and

Suspensions

Continued from Page 1A

Fire Commission," Smith said of the agreement. He did not directly address Wicklund's case.

Information on the suspensions was released to USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin this week in response to an Open Records Law request made almost three months ago.

In January, Smith had suspended Wicklund for 20 days without pay. Smith had the officer served 15 days of the suspension; the other five were "held in abeyance," records show.

City officials wouldn't discuss the reasons behind the suspensions yet, saying the officers still have several days to begin legal action opposing the release of the details of their cases. More details of the cases will be revealed when disciplinary records are made available on Feb. 27, said Joanne Bungert, a lawyer for the city.

State law requires the city to notify employees of its intent to release personnel records and give the employees adequate time to respond.

"We need to wait the appropriate number of days," she said, "so we avoid the possibility of litigation."

The records released this week lists disciplinary actions for nine officers, ranging from one-day suspensions to a termination, imposed from Jan. 1 through Nov. 30, 2017. Disciplinary action against several of the officers has been previously reported.

The list doesn't include the name of Michael Rahn, an officer who quit in March following an excessive-force case, or two officers who resigned in early 2017 to avoid discipline for having harassed fellow officers in 2016.



Schmitt

Despite the number of departures and suspensions, Mayor Jim Schmitt said he retains confidence in Smith and his officers.

"I have no reason to be concerned," Schmitt said. "Chief Smith has a style of managing the department that's extremely professional and that works. He holds people accountable on all levels."

Re-training ordered

The newly released records list only basic informa-

tion about the suspensions: the officer's name, date and the disciplinary action taken. Three of the four were disciplined in August:

■ Officer Kurt Brester was suspended 15 days without pay, and ordered to undergo training regarding harassment and civil-rights issues. He was also barred from acting as a field-training officer for a year.

■ Officers Kevin Bahl and Scott Salzman were ordered to undergo training regarding harassment and civil-rights issues, and suspended for one day without pay.

While it's unclear if there is a connection, Brester, Bahl and Salzman were suspended as police officials were investigating the harassment of women and minority officers on the night shift. Brester has been named in a civil rights complaint in which Officer Stephanie Dantoin alleges she was harassed because of her gender and marital status.

Decisions challenged

For a department not known for having disciplinary issues, the 2017 numbers in Green Bay are being no-

Continued on Next Page

ticed elsewhere.

Jim Palmer, who heads the Wisconsin Professional Police Association, said Green Bay's numbers are easily noticed compared what's known about the department's discipline cases in previous years — though what they mean isn't as clear. WPPA is the state's largest police union, but doesn't represent Green Bay officers.

"I'd be interested to see the extent to which these actions are being challenged," Palmer said. "If not, that would probably make the argument that the chief is cleaning house, changing the culture. But if they are? That would not reflect well."

Officers have challenged, or are challenging, some of Smith's decisions.

Four officers in the department reviewed a controversial 2017 traffic stop that led to Rahn's resignation, and the suspension of three other officers without pay. Their conclusion: The use of force was justified. And the city's police union called the level of discipline "troubling."

In addition, one of the suspended officers is fighting Smith's attempt to fire him. Officer Paul Spoerl, who Smith said admitted to using excessive force and filing a re-

port that was incomplete or inaccurate, has taken his case to a hearing before the Police and Fire Commission.

The group has heard testimony on behalf of the officer and the department, and is expected to rule on the firing this month.

Public's perceptions

Green Bay citizens could perceive the growing number of disciplinary cases since Smith's arrival as necessary housecleaning, or as a problem, according to a law professor who studies regulation of police.

The key issue, he said, is the public's level of trust in the department.

"In the short term, publicized misconduct might hurt people's perception of the police," said Seth Stoughton, a University of South Carolina law professor who had been a police officer and investigator in Florida. "But in the long run — this is true in most police agencies — is that being highly transparent about discipline and misconduct issues can improve the public trust."

"No one has ever built a long-term trusting relationship by hiding information."

Smith's challenge, according to Stoughton, might be maintaining the

trust of the department's rank-and-file officers.

"If a chief comes in and starts airing some of an agency's dirty laundry to the public and his officers don't necessarily agree, it can have a detrimental effect," he said. "It can affect morale, which can affect (officers') behavior."

"Some may adopt a lay-low approach — going only on the calls they're assigned, not being proactive."

Previous controversy

Two of the disciplined officers have generated controversy before.

A video published to YouTube in 2014 showed Wicklund aggressively tackling a 29-year-old Caledonia man who was mouthing off and swearing. The man was later convicted of disorderly conduct and resisting arrest.

Wicklund, who at the time had been the subject of 22 commendations and 14 complaints as a member of the department, was later cleared by his fellow officers of having used excessive force. But the department received hundreds of complaints about the arrest from people who'd seen the video.

Besides the Dantoin harassment complaint, Brester was named in a \$1.5 million civil rights lawsuit filed in 2016 by a

robbery suspect who claims he and a second officer, Casey Masiak, roughed him up during a 2016 arrest. Masiak resigned from the department in early 2017 when the night-shift harassment issues became public.

The man filing the civil-rights suit, Charles Gill Sr. of Appleton, was convicted of felony robbery by force.

Gill, now 41, is on pro-

bation for the robbery after serving a year in Brown County Jail; he

also must perform hours of community service.

WBAY PORTUGAL, SPAIN AND THE DOURO RIVER TRAVEL SHOW

Wed. March 7, 2018
6:30p.m. at Hall of Fame Chophouse
1004 Brett Favre Pass, Green Bay

Join Fox and George Graphos
on a breathtaking Uniworld River
Cruise through UNESCO-designated
Douro Valley into Spain.

Space is limited. Reserve your spot for the show
online at FoxWorldTravelShows.com or call 866-369-7787.

FOX
World Travel

abc 2
UNIWORLD
UNESCO DESIGNATED

