

Fullerton's History With the Homeless



Fullerton Police Department headquarters. (Photo by: Tracy Wood)

By Tracy Wood

The Fullerton Police Department has an officer whose job includes dealing with the homeless and their myriad mental health and other issues. In fact, the officer, Cpl. John DeCaprio, completed a two-day course last year on how to recognize the mentally ill on the streets and handle those situations. "One of the main goals of the training program," according to the Orange County Health Care Agency's course description, "is to enable the law enforcement personnel to recognize the

signs and symptoms of mental health illness, and increase the attendees' awareness and competence in handling emergency situations involving persons who are seriously mental ill." But DeCaprio wasn't on duty the night of July 5 when six Fullerton officers repeatedly **beat and used a stun gun** on Kelly Thomas, a schizophrenic transient who, they said, became violent when the officers began questioning him about reported car break-ins near the city bus station. And it is unclear whether any of the officers involved in the beating were among the department's 12 officers and one civilian employee who received the same training that DeCaprio did.

Police Chief Michael Sellers has not addressed specific questions about his administration's approach to dealing with the homeless, and Wednesday he went on **indefinite medical leave**. The District Attorney's Office is investigating the circumstances of Thomas' death, and the FBI's Civil Rights Division also has launched an investigation. The City Council has called a special meeting for Friday morning to discuss hiring Michael Gennaco, chief attorney for the Los Angeles County Office of Independent Review, to examine the Thomas case. In addition, a recall campaign has been announced against three of the five council members, and there have been numerous calls from the public and two council members for Sellers to resign. He cannot be fired while he is on medical leave, according to the city.

Recognizing mental illness has been a part of standard police training for years. Those who know Fullerton say community group have a history of compassion toward the homeless. "Fullerton's had a pretty stellar response to the issue of community response to homelessness," said Rusty Kennedy, executive director of the county Human Relations Council. "There's been pretty significant, broad-based support in Fullerton for addressing the issue of homelessness."

Kennedy, who was born and grew up in Fullerton and still lives there, added that the police department has often had a representative on the county Human Relations Commission. Most recently it was former Police Chief Pat McKinley, Sellers' predecessor and now a member of the Fullerton City Council. "We are a city that is friendly to the homeless and cares about them," said former Councilwoman Pam Keller, executive director of the Fullerton Collaborative, an association of city leaders and civic groups. The group works to help the homeless.

The Fullerton Way

Former Fullerton Police Chief Philip Goehring retired 19 years ago at the end of a 32-year career with the department, rising through the ranks to the top. While he was chief, he said, he was appointed by the Board of Supervisors to the

county Human Relations Commission, and his wife, Dorothy, worked for the county Social Services Agency, running, among other things, the county's winter homeless shelter program.

One of those shelters is the Fullerton National Guard Armory, and Goehring said he was a volunteer who worked nights, cleaning up and serving meals to those who had nowhere else to sleep. When officers joined the Fullerton department from other police agencies, he said, the city department drilled into them "there's the Fullerton way, and public service is paramount." Lee Devore, a Fullerton officer for 30 years who served during the Goehring era, said he and three or four other officers did volunteer work with the homeless. Devore still is an emeritus board member for the Shepherder shelter in Orange. Devore recalled "a couple of homeless" who, he said, "were just a constant pain to us, getting drunk and raising heck. Everybody's got them. You deal with it." "Back in those days," he said, "we didn't have all of the resources that are available now" to help the homeless. But, he said, officers did have a list of places that would help those in need, although "it wasn't a formal [department] program as such."

Others in the community also remember when the department handed out blue cards from Fullerton Interfaith Emergency Services, which was founded by community leader Barbara Johnson and downtown religious leaders in 1975. It operates a shelter for homeless families and runs a food bank. The cards, which the charity still produces, not only tell Fullerton's homeless where they can get food but list other homeless services, like medical clinics at St. Jude Hospital and possible sources of shelter. Fullerton, however, doesn't have nearly enough shelter space for everyone in need, and there is no year-round emergency shelter in Orange County. The Board of Supervisors this week began considering opening one.

In addition, the congregations of the religious groups that helped start and maintain Fullerton Interfaith Emergency Services — Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Jewish and Disciples of Christ — have run their own food banks, temporary shelters, clothes distribution and soup kitchens, most within walking distance of each other. For more than 20 years, the religious groups have worked together, serving a hot meal to the homeless six days a week and providing sandwiches and other food that they can take away for a later meal. And Thursday, Fullerton religious leaders, led by the groups that helped start Interfaith Emergency Services, are meeting to discuss the Thomas case.

Concern Crosses Partisan Lines

It is also clear that the outcry over the Thomas beating runs across political lines in a city that is known for its fierce — and sometimes nasty — partisanship. Conservative blogger Tony Bushala, whose **Friends for Fullerton's Future** is the main source of information and tips about the beating, has said the issue is beyond party politics.

City Councilwoman Sharon Quirk Silva, a Democrat, said she became aware of the difficulties families face dealing with a mentally ill relative when she experienced her own family's struggles to help a brother-in-law. Former City Councilman Shawn Nelson, a conservative Republican who is now a county supervisor, was the first to call for the FBI civil rights investigation into Thomas' death. Bruce Whitaker, a member of the City Council and an aide to Assemblyman Chris Norby (R-Fullerton) joined Quirk Silva in urging Sellers to step down. Although Quirk Silva and Whitaker have called for Sellers to resign, Quirk Silva said "my belief right now is [Thomas' death] is not indicative of the whole department." She said it's important for city leaders to ask "tough questions" but "also be kind." Training or other procedures may need to be changed, but, she said, "the bottom line" is to find out what happened.

Voice of OC intern Nick Gerda contributed to this story.