

Justice Department probes Inglewood, Calif., PD

By THOMAS WATKINS, Associated Press Writer

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The U.S. Department of Justice is reviewing procedures and tactics used by suburban Inglewood police officers involved in use-of-force incidents, officials said Thursday.

The federal probe follows a string of high-profile police shootings that left four dead last year and outraged many in the Los Angeles County city of about 110,000.

Chief Jacqueline Seabrooks said in a statement the Justice Department notified her of the probe Wednesday.

"We will cooperate completely in all aspects of this investigation," she said. "We have been at work for months in implementing reforms aimed at improving how our officers go about their jobs, and we will continue to pursue efforts that heighten public safety."

Justice Department spokeswoman Laura Sweeney said a patterns-and-practices investigation had been launched but she could not comment further because the probe was ongoing.

Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., called for a federal investigation following the most recent incident, the Aug. 31 killing of homeless man Eddie Felix Franco. Police said he was shot after he reached for a toy gun tucked into his waistband.

On July 21, Kevin Wicks was shot and killed at his home after police responded to a report of a dispute. According to police, officers knocked on his door late at night and when he answered, he had a gun in his hand.

Questions remain about whether police responded to the right apartment because Wicks was alone and the 911 call indicates the caller was unsure where the dispute was happening.

The officer involved in that shooting, Brian Ragan, remains on paid leave while the shooting is investigated. Ragan had been involved in another fatal shooting only 10 weeks earlier, when he and his patrol partner opened fire at Michael Byoune, 19.

Byoune was shot shortly after getting into a car outside an Inglewood fast food restaurant. Officials said at the time the car was driving toward the officers and they believed gunfire was coming from within.

On July 1, an Inglewood officer fatally shot Ruben Ortega in a confrontation after a radio call about gang members trespassing led to a foot pursuit down an alley. An investigation by the district attorney's office found the shooting was justified because Ortega repeatedly reached into his pocket and the officer believed he could have been trying to get a weapon, district attorney spokeswoman Sandi Gibbons said.

The district attorney continues to investigate the other three shootings and the Los Angeles County Office of

Independent Review is also looking into the Police Department's practices in general, Inglewood police spokesman Lt. Mike McBride said. The department also is reviewing the shootings.

The department faces at least one lawsuit. Kevin Wicks' parents allege their son's constitutional rights were violated and he was justified to answer his own front door with a weapon since he lived in a dangerous neighborhood. Wicks' children are also suing, though that lawsuit may be consolidated with the first one, attorney Anthony Luti said.

"It's about time," Luti said. "We are very pleased the Department of Justice has launched an investigation into what we have been asserting is an absolutely horrendous pattern of police practices."

Since November, the Inglewood Police Department has introduced a 120-hour training session for all officers to improve decision making and strengthen tactical responses, McBride said. About 70 percent of the department's 191 officers have undergone the training. Supervisors are required to do an additional 20 hours of training.

Inglewood has about 220 officers covering the 9-square-mile city 10 miles southwest of downtown Los Angeles.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2009/03/12/state/n124811D36.DTL>

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