



The Times

'Sleeper' photo creates nightmare for Trenton

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BY EVA LOAYZA

TRENTON -- A former city police internal affairs commander charges that the police captain shown napping at his station in a photo posted on the Internet this week was never disciplined for a similar incident that happened four years ago.

The police department is investigating the photo that allegedly shows Capt. Paul Messina asleep in a chair. The picture comes just months after a 4-year-old video of then Lt. Messina, asleep in a chair with his feet propped up on a desk, was posted on the YouTube Web site.

The former commander, who declined to have his name published, said Messina's first sleeping offense, in 2003, did not result in any punishment that he knew of by Police Director Joseph Santiago. He said the report was delivered to Santiago but never sent back to internal affairs with any action to be taken. "I never saw it again," the now retired commander said.

But Santiago said Messina received a written reprimand back in 2003. The director said he did not comment on the penalty when asked about it by a Times reporter back in January because the matter was four years old. Santiago said Messina is entitled to a hearing for the latest allegation. If the current investigation proves Messina committed the same infraction again, he will get more than a reprimand, he said. Santiago said he has no reason to protect Messina, and said he tries to treat everyone equally, including foes.

"There's all kinds of past precedents' (in New Jersey with sleeping officers), and the fact that he got away with nothing was very demoralizing," said the former commander, who was in charge of investigating the first sleeping incident.

The former commander, who spent more than 25 years on the force, noted the recent New Jersey Supreme Court decision siding with Bordentown Township when they fired an officer for sleeping on duty. The commander said Trenton police once suspended a police officer who fell asleep in Mill Hill park.

Santiago said the officer referenced by the former commander had his seat in a reclined position, with his hat covering his face in the middle of the afternoon where the public could easily see him. The officer was suspended five days because he did not admit to doing anything wrong, said the director. Unlike that officer, Messina acknowledged wrongdoing for the 2003 incident, said Santiago.

Media outlets in Philadelphia and New York reported the story of the most recent picture yesterday. In it, Messina is asleep on a chair with his head tilted back and his arms resting across his stomach. His back is to the desk.

There is no date on the picture, but it was allegedly taken on June 24, when the Web posting claims, Messina was supposed to be monitoring a computer that shows police vehicle positions and another computer that shows all current and pending police assignments. The posting has been updated to show a gun belt is sitting unattended on a nearby table. The department's internal affairs bureau is investigating the incident.

Mayor Douglas H. Palmer would not talk about the picture, only saying he has faith in the investigation.

Council President Paul Pintella said he has never heard of any major disciplinary action against Messina.

Pintella said he did not think the picture of Messina allegedly sleeping on duty warranted news coverage.

It is just a snapshot and it is possible Messina was on break and resting, said Pintella.

"He's a pretty good officer. He's well-liked, respected and he does his job," said Pintella.

"What I've read or seen (about Messina) is no indication of the police officer he is," he added.

Pintella believed the picture was posted to discredit Messina and indirectly discredit Santiago.

Pintella said he has seen officers in patrol cars in remote areas napping during their lunch breaks. He said he did not want to dismiss what allegedly happened, but said, "I don't think every one of those instances, they don't need a major blow. Things do happen." Pintella said he had no doubt that the appropriate action would be taken.

South Ward Councilman Jim Coston said he was sure the incident is something Messina regrets.

"It doesn't speak well for the professionalism of the department, at least publicly," said Coston.

Coston said he was interested in seeing what is done in terms of discipline. Situations like these should be handled fairly and equitably regardless of rank, he said. "There should not be a double standard," he said.

Staff writer Kevin Shea contributed to this report.

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