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'Areas of Concern' around Tempe Police Department's forensic unit, memo reveals

An internal memo from the Tempe Police Department reveals there are "areas of concern" within the department's Forensic Services Unit, despite the city saying it's about a need for advanced training.



By: Nicole Grigg

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TEMPE, AZ — A recent memo sent from Tempe Police Department's assistant chief of police to prosecutors reveals there are "areas of concern" with the department's Forensic Services Unit (FSU), despite the city saying it's about a need for advanced training.

Tempe's FSU is made up of crime scene technicians who process crime scenes, from homicides and sexual assaults to officer-involved shootings.

The letter dated September 27, 2023, said: "A recent assessment of staff capabilities revealed a lack of consistency in operations, and a separate evaluation of our latent print analysis capability identified significant shortcomings," wrote Interim Assistant Police Chief James Sweig.

"Given the critical nature of these analyses, a zero-defect performance standard is imperative," the letter said.

The memo is something that Tempe officials didn't know that the ABC15 Investigators obtained, and when ABC15 reached out to them for comment about "concerns" with the Forensic Services Unit, they repeatedly said this is about the need for "advanced" or "additional" training.



department, “made the decision to upgrade the training provided to FSU team members.”

Days later, they told the ABC15 Investigators that Tempe is striving to be a leader and provide the highest level of service for the people in their community, “to reach that level of performance, the supervisor determined that the unit could benefit from shared standard operating procedures and shared training.”

As a result, Tempe’s FSU, in collaboration with the police department’s legal team, is auditing and reviewing work in latent print analysis to determine if issues or errors exist.

A spokesperson for Tempe said that a review of cases has found that not a single case has been compromised.

“Any suggestion that members of the FSU getting additional training will somehow open the door to overturning criminal convictions is simply wrong,” a statement said.

Some are skeptical of Tempe’s explanation.

“They're definitely downplaying this to the public,” said Armando Nava, a local defense attorney. “They want us to believe that they did nothing wrong.”

The City of Tempe said they will be reviewing cases that go back three years, which will include hundreds of cases.

Nava said he has a major case he is defending out of Tempe.

“This gives me really big concerns about whether evidence that was collected is sufficient, and that whether what they’re telling us, what they believe happened,



Another internal document shows what these changes mean for Tempe — the members of the Forensics Services Unit will not respond to crime scenes, with the exception of providing photography support at traffic fatalities and serious injury crashes, non-suspicious deaths or suicides, and photo documentation during warrant operations.

For major incidents like homicides, stranger sexual assaults, and officer-involved shootings, Mesa's police department will respond to all of them.

The City of Tempe tells the ABC15 Investigators that the contract between them and Mesa Police Department's forensics unit has cost at least \$170,000 to date.

Tempe reviewing cases also raises questions to those who have been around the forensics world for decades. Bert Ouderkirk is the department chair for justice studies at Mesa Community College, where he teaches classes for crime scene processing.

“If somebody is saying that they haven't found any issues with any of the cases, then why are they being retrained? That's the first question that pops into my head. Why are you being retrained if everything's okay,” said Ouderkirk.

The internal memo by Tempe's interim assistant chief of police says that Mesa's Forensic Services Unit is also evaluating prior incidents and will train Tempe personnel consistent with contemporary standards.

The letter goes on to state that Tempe's forensic members will go through a 16-week academy conducted by an “accredited agency” to align with contemporary forensic science standards.

Nava, who is also with Arizona's Attorneys for Criminal Justice, questions why Tempe's own department is reviewing the cases.



be doing their own audit.

As for why this matters for defense attorneys:

“This raises questions about whether innocent people have been convicted by shoddy forensics over the past three years,” said Nava.

The City of Tempe would not do an on-camera interview but sent several statements.

The first statement sent on 9/26/23:

“The City of Tempe Forensic Services Unit (FSU) never lost a certification. That simply did not happen -- full stop. No case has been compromised, nor has any investigation been hampered by the FSU and its team members.

After a period of review by the new supervisor of the Forensic Services Unit and the City of Tempe's new Chief of Police, plus an independent review by the City of Mesa's forensics experts, the department made the decision to upgrade the training provided to FSU team members. These team members -- each of whom has taken multiple forensics classes and several of whom have college degrees in forensics -- continue to collect evidence and process crime scenes while receiving this advanced training.

In the interim, Tempe has contracted with the Mesa Police Department's forensics unit to process some major crime scenes. That cost -- to date about \$170,000 -- is well worth it to ensure that Tempe residents are safe, and that criminal cases are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

Two days later ABC15 received a new statement signed by the Chief of Police:



A city spokesperson added this week, by email, “Our FSU team is well qualified. There has been no wrongdoing. No cases have been compromised. The Tempe Police Department’s effort to further train its team is meant to achieve the goal of offering the highest level of service to our residents and to provide a standard for the Tempe Police Department.”

Have a tip? Reach out to Investigator Nicole Grigg at nicole.grigg@abc15.com.

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