

Former trainee: Safety not priority at police academy

Claire Withycombe Salem
Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Ron Martin was lying on the floor of a padded room, screaming in pain and staring at the ceiling.

It was his fourth week of training for his new job at the Multnomah County Sheriff's office.

A few moments before he lay in agony, waiting for paramedics, he had been participating in a role-playing exercise at the state's public safety training campus in Salem. It was Oct. 24, 2019.

In the scenario, another recruit had been playing an inmate. The "inmate" was pinning a third recruit, acting as the corrections officer, to the ground. The "officer" called Martin in as backup.

When Martin entered the scene, he decided he wasn't far away enough to use his stun gun. He felt the only choice was to "physically interact," he said, and so he tried to push the recruit playing an inmate off the other recruit.

The recruit playing the inmate didn't budge, Martin said. He turned toward Martin and grabbed his right calf in a bear hug, applying pressure with his upper body and hyperextending Martin's knee.

Martin fell backward, hinging forward at the hip. As he fell, he heard — and felt — 10 to 15 pops down the back of his leg.

"I knew my body was tearing," Martin said in an interview with the Statesman Journal. "And then I hit the ground."

Martin has filed a written complaint with the state alleging the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training neglected to provide "a

safe training environment."

He is asking the state to compensate him for income and benefits he's lost due to the negligence he says caused his injuries, an amount he estimates is at least \$100,000.

The training academy certifies and trains Oregon's public safety professionals, from the operator who answers when you dial 9-1-1 to the officer who shows up when you get into a fender bender.

An administrator says safety is a top priority. But the department does not centrally track how many injuries occur during the training of public safety officers each year. And at least one other neighboring state stopped allowing trainees to play "suspects" years ago.

Recovery halts career plans

Martin, 48, was hired to work in Multnomah County as a corrections officer in July 2019.

Corrections officers go through a six-week course at the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training campus in Salem. The department is overseen by a 24-member board that sets the standards for training and certification.

Martin's career has spanned a wide range of jobs, from commercial fisherman to professional ballet dancer. He had been cooking in the county's juvenile justice center when he got a notice to sit on a grand jury — the group of citizens who weigh in on whether prosecutors should charge people accused of crimes. That experience spurred him to seek out a career in policing, the third generation in

his family to do so.

But he hasn't set foot in the jail since he was injured.

When he was knocked backward during the training exercise, Martin said he stretched out his arm, to try and lessen the impact. It twisted behind him and his head hit the ground.

Martin said he tore his hamstring — the collection of three muscles on the back of the thigh — from his pelvis, herniated a disc in his neck, tore a meniscus in his knee and sprained his right shoulder.

A letter dated Dec. 17, 2020, that Martin provided to the Statesman Journal from his workers' compensation processing company shows the company accepting a meniscal tear in his right knee, right shoulder sprain and right hamstring strain, as well as what's called a "cervical radiculopathy" — in simple terms, a pinched nerve — in a section of the neck.

In December 2019, Martin had surgery to have his hamstring reattached. In June of this year, he underwent another surgery to have his neck fused.

Nearly two years after he was injured, Martin is able to walk but his neurosurgeon has recommended he doesn't raise his arms over his head, or lift anything more than 10 pounds until the nerve in his neck can heal. He's able to lift and cuddle the fluffy Silkie chickens he and his husband keep in their backyard. But fishing, one of his favorite activities, has been off-limits since he got hurt.

Even doing paperwork for more than a half-hour or so can be painful, Martin said, because he needs to keep his neck neutral as much as possible.

Some of Martin's treatments were delayed because of the pandemic. He was about a month into starting to walk again when the pandemic hit, so he didn't get the last three months of rehab on his hamstring. But he expects to finish that at some point. He waited longer than is typical before getting his neck fused.

And now he's waiting for his neck to heal before he can have surgery on his knee to repair the torn meniscus. That won't likely happen until next year.

Before going to the training academy, Martin said he was cleared by a doctor as part of the hiring process. He said he underwent a basic physical and disclosed the three surgeries he'd previously had on his left knee, right ankle and lumbar, and the doctor didn't give him any indication those would pose problems.

"That information was all brought to their atten-

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Web site: www.SilvertonAppeal.com

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News Director
Don Currie
503-399-6655
dcurrie@statesmanjournal.com

Advertising
Westsmb@gannett.com

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tion when they hired me," Martin said. "I don't think they would have hired me if they felt it was going to cause a problem."

Video evidence disappears

An internal report paints a different picture of how the injuries occurred.

Scott Willadsen, a coordinator for the police academy, wrote a report about the incident that day, saying as Martin entered the scenario, "his feet got near the heads of the other two students." The agency redacted the names of the other students.

"[Redacted], acting as a role player, got ahold of Martin's foot/ankle in what appeared to be an attempt to restrict Martin's movement," Willadsen wrote. "This action did not appear reckless or out of control but it did restrict some movement in Martin's leg."

Willadsen continued: "As Martin appeared to try and free his foot he somehow moved in a way that caused him pain in the back of his leg and he then fell to the ground."

Martin takes issue with how the report is written. He said he was never interviewed for the report, so how could they know when he felt pain? Martin said it was falling the way he did that caused him pain.

And while the report makes note that half the class and the instructor witnessed the incident, it doesn't include statements from or interviews with other members of his class.

Brian Henson, administrator of the operations and services division at DPSST, said Martin was "transported and not available for comment" when Willadsen logged his report.

The next day, Oct. 25, Martin sent his own report of the incident to class coordinator James Webb. He forwarded it to the Statesman Journal. In it, he wrote the other student "had been able to grab me by wrapping both of his arms around the lower part of my right leg."

"I tried to pull away, but his strength overpowered my resistance," Martin wrote. "He squeezed even harder on my lower leg and applied pressure with his upper body until my knee bent backwards and I began to fall."

Training scenarios are filmed. But the video of Martin's injury "was lost when the instructor attempted to save it," and could not be recovered, according to a records specialist for the department.

Willadsen did not return a request for comment from the Statesman Journal. He wrote in his report that while he was able to review the video "along with several other instruc-

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