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 roleplaying 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" pinning a third was recruit, acting as the corrections officer, to the "officer" ground. The 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

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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

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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 tors" and to document the incident in his report, a signal to a server was lost and the video and notes "appeared to not save."

'Safety is our No. 1 concern'

In Washington state, when there is a serious injury during police training, the agency procedure is to conduct an internal investigation and interview the instructor and every witness, as well as the injured student, said Sean Hendrickson, manager of the applied skills training division at the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission.

First, the injured student writes a report, including a list of everyone who witnessed the incident, and that is sent to the assistant commander, who runs the internal investigation, puts together their findings and sends that report to the commander of basic training.

Oregon's procedures require all injuries to be reported and documented, and the agency retains the records for two years. But so it would require searching for the injury reports in files associated with each class in each discipline.

A week before Martin was injured, on Oct. 17, 2019, another student, Dustyn Matlock, was severely injured while practicing "defensive tactics" in off-hours in the academy dorms with three other students.

Salem Police investigated the incident, but prosecutors decided not to file criminal charges. Deputy District Attorney Matt Kemmy said in a memo on the incident that the other trainees downplayed the extent of Matlock's injuries and discouraged him from seeking medical help.

The three trainees had claimed that one of them. Joseph DeLance, had lifted Matlock off the ground and "somehow" he fell over and hit the ground. But the emergency room doctor who treated Matlock told investigators that his injuries "were more consistent with being slammed to the ground and blunt force trauma with a higher level of

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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 attenback 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 mv 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 instructhe procedures don't require that witnesses be interviewed.

Henson, the academy administrator, said the number of students who get hurt in training "is very small in relation to" the thousands of students that graduate.

"So it would appear that what we do works," Henson said. "Could it be better? Sure. We can always sav we can do more and we always try to do more, but safety is our No.1 concern."

The department has a safety committee that each month reviews every injury that happens at the academy, Henson said. That committee does not include a medical professional.

"We're constantly looking at what may have happened," Henson said, "And if it did happen, how... it happened, and could it have been mitigated, or how do we mitigate it further, those types of things.

But Henson said he could not recall a time where the safety commitrecommended tee changes to training processes after reviewing a specific incident.

Nationally, about 1.2% of U.S. students didn't complete basic police training in 2018 due to injury or illness, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. That amounts to 714 of the roughly 59,500 students in basic police training that year.

The state police agency said it could not respond in time for publication to a Statesman Journal request for information about the number of injuries that occurred in the past two years at the training facility. It doesn't track those injuries in one place

force.'

Had he gone to sleep like the other three students were encouraging him to do, he could have died, the doctor said.

The state Board of Public Safety Standards and Training revoked DeLance's previously held certification as a corrections officer in July. His police certification is still under review, Henson said.

Staff for the agency found DeLance's attempts to minimize his behavior and Matlock's injuries, and his failure to report the incident violated the board's "moral fitness" standards. He resigned from the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office more than a year ago, in April 2020.

Court records show Matlock is suing DeLance in Deschutes County Circuit Court, alleging battery and negligence, for \$950,000.

Matlock is still in his probationary period, Henson said. His agency asked for additional time for him to complete his certification. He has until Jan. 18, 2022 to get certified, unless the agency asks for another extension.

'A responsibility of the trainer'

Harvev Hedden, executive director of the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association, said trainers need to strike a delicate balance – making training realistic while also reducing the risk of injuries.

In Martin's case, students were practicing what is known in police training as "defensive tactics," basically the range of techniques police use to

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