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HEADLINE: Feds shape up **Pittsburgh** department;
After five years of oversight, residents say cops more humane

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BODY:

PITTSBURGH -- When Witold Walczak, the legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union's **Pittsburgh** chapter, moved here in 1991, he asked a **police** officer for directions. Instead, the officer laced into him with a series of expletives.

"I was amazed. All I did was ask for directions," Walczak said.

Five years later, the ACLU filed a lawsuit on behalf of 65 people who claimed that the **police** department routinely violated the civil rights of citizens.

Soon afterward, the U.S. Justice Department opened an investigation. And in 1997, **Pittsburgh** became the first U.S. **police** department to sign a federal order agreeing to court oversight and an independent monitor. The department agreed to make dozens of changes in the way it handled complaints, used force and made arrests.

And today, 10 months after the federal oversight ended in September, residents, civil libertarians, civic leaders and the **police** officers themselves say **Pittsburgh** has a more effective and humane **police** department. Complaints and lawsuits against officers have dropped. The department has improved training, closely monitored the performance of officers and rewritten its procedures on how officers should handle civilians.

"African-Americans have long looked to the federal government to ensure civil rights. I think **police** knew that they had to follow the rules while the monitor was in place," said Randall Taylor, who works for the Allegheny County treasurer's office and sits on the school board.

Assistant **Pittsburgh Police Chief** William **Mullen** said the order, called a consent decree, that established the federal oversight wasn't necessary, but it put in place good practices.

"Nothing has changed since the end of the consent decree," Mullen said. "We're still doing the same things."

Close scrutiny

The wide-ranging agreement between **Pittsburgh** and the federal government to reform the **Police** Department, which was approved in April 1997, required **police** to increase training, especially for young officers. Any officer who received three complaints -- whether they were found to be valid or not -- was required to undergo remedial training or reassignment. The city was required to investigate all strip searches and serious injuries to people during confrontations with **police**.

During the federal oversight, sergeants were required to make 20 unannounced inspections of officers' conduct every three months. That meant showing up unannounced at a traffic stop or a crime scene, said Sgt. Richard Pritchard of the city's Zone 2 precinct.

The key change, **police**, experts and activists say, was the creation of a \$1 million computer database that tracks officers' performance and flags officers for closer review on a variety of factors from citizen complaints to traffic accidents to forcible arrests.

The department also now requires a supervisor to approve all **police** chases. Recently, a chase for a possible murder suspect was called off because it was 2:30 p.m. and schools were letting out, Mullen said.

Silent complaints

The federal oversight of the **police** department started shortly after the ACLU received a stream of complaints from the public about how they were being treated by **police** officers and the failure of the department to address the complaints.

From suburbanites attending Steelers games to black residents living in the Hill District, residents said there was little chance of their complaints being upheld. Over a 10-year period, 1,600 citizen disciplinary complaints were filed without any officer being disciplined, an audit by the city comptroller found.

Although **Pittsburgh** officials never admitted wrongdoing by the department, they signed a consent decree in August 1997 to avoid lengthy and expensive court battles.

"We didn't understand. Why us?" said **Mullen**, the assistant **police chief**. "New York shot 43 unarmed people. New Orleans had extensive **police** corruption. We had none of that."

But Mullen said the department was lax on training new officers, especially after a wave of more than 150 senior officers in the mid-1990s took advantage of an early retirement offer.

"We had rookies training rookies," he said.

There also was merit to the complaints about verbal abuse of people by officers, Mullen said. He attributed it to the hiring of all the new officers, many of whom had served in predominantly white, rural **police** departments.

Mullen and other officers also praised the effectiveness of the independent monitor, James Ginger, a former Evansville, Ind., **police** officer.

Although they didn't always agree, the monitor and the department never took disputes to federal court.

A better job

The year after the federal oversight began, major crime rose by 9.6 percent, which the **police** union attributed to officers being wary of the new consent decree. But the city of 334,500 is still ranked as one of America's 10 safest cities, according to the FBI, and had 47 murders in 2002, down 14.5 percent from the previous year.

Residents say the **police** department is doing a better job.

Oliver Flowers, a shop in the city that has been owned by the Conley family since 1930, was robbed in 2001 of \$250.

"The **police** were here within two minutes," said Ann Conley, who praised the **police** for catching the suspect accused of a string of 20 robberies. "They're looking out for us."

Pittsburgh Officer Jim Glick, 30, said he doesn't mind life under the consent decree.

Any time he stops someone, he has to fill out a form. If he searches a motorist's trunk, he has to fill out another form.

"There's more paperwork and some of the older officers weren't too happy about it," Glick said last week, while on patrol on Mount Washington, a neighborhood that overlooks the city's skyline.

But the paperwork also protects officers from complaints. Citizens are required to sign the form stating what occurred during a search or a traffic stop.

Reform not perfect

The federal oversight and the department are not without critics.

"The best way to survive the consent decree was to do nothing," said Brian Campbell, an attorney for the Fraternal Order of **Police** in **Pittsburgh**.

Two city school board members said there are still many examples of **police** officers using excessive force.

"I worry that if more isn't done, all hell could break loose," said school board member Mark Brentley Sr. In 1993, he was handcuffed and taken to a precinct for asking an officer if he could leave an intersection. He filed a complaint and got a form letter rejecting it.

"I don't think the letter ever touched human hands," Brentley said.

But Walczak noted that he had a much more pleasant experience with an officer in March than the one he had when he arrived in **Pittsburgh** 12 years ago.

When he was stopped for running a red light, "I gave the officer some lip -- respectfully, though -- and told him I thought it was yellow," Walczak said. "The officer, to his credit, didn't get mad. He treated me respectfully and told me I could file a complaint against him if I wanted to."

At a glance

In 1997, the **Pittsburgh Police** Department agreed to rectify civil rights complaints and satisfy a court-ordered decree by taking steps that included:

- * Establishing a computer system that tracks complaints against officers, which enables the department to identify and discipline rogue cops.
- * Making regular unannounced checks on officer conduct with the public.
- * Filing a report whenever anyone is stopped or searched.

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