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Baltimore police shake up leadership

Move comes after attacks downtown, in Bolton Hill

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The Police Department ousted its top leadership yesterday in the Central District, a move that comes amid violent attacks in the downtown area and one day after The Baltimore Sun reported that officers had failed to properly handle the robbery of a nanny in Bolton Hill.

Maj. John Bailey, a 35-year veteran, and his second in command, Deputy Maj. Avon Mackell, a 21-year veteran, were stripped of their command positions after what sources described as a particularly heated exchange with department leadership after a woman was choked and robbed of an iPod while she walked with a baby Monday afternoon.

At the department's weekly Comstat meeting, in which commanders discuss crime trends, Deputy Commissioner Anthony Barksdale demanded to know why officers had failed initially to take a report from the 24-year-old woman and why supervisors had not caught the error, sources said. At one point, Barksdale stormed out of the meeting, the sources said.

The shake-up appears to be an effort by police leadership to take a tougher stance against underreporting of crimes, with commanders also being warned that a new internal affairs chief would root out officers who downgrade or fail to report incidents.

The Central District has seen one of the largest drops in crime so far this year, according to department statistics. But there have been reports of a number of apparently random attacks on residents and tourists by groups of juveniles, and police have been trying different strategies to quell early-morning disturbances linked to the downtown bar and club scene. City officials have mounted a public relations blitz to reassure visitors that the harbor area is safe.

Deputy Maj. Dennis Smith of the Northern District was appointed to replace Bailey, effective immediately, the department said in a news release.

Mayor Sheila Dixon said the Central District continues to be one of the city's safest areas. But when police commanders and others are repeatedly reminded to do better and they don't, "there is a need to make some changes," she said.

"I have talked with the commissioner, and I know that he is concerned by what is happening in the Central [District]," Dixon said shortly before the changes were announced. "He is very

frustrated, and he is going to be making some changes."

Robert F. Cherry, president of the city police union, said it was unusual for a district's major and deputy major to be forced out at the same time.

He said that as the city claims that the Inner Harbor area is under control, officers are being pulled from other districts to beef up the downtown presence, leaving neighborhoods vulnerable. A beefed-up complement of officers is to start patrolling the harbor area next week.

"They're pulling from other districts to address a problem that they say doesn't exist," Cherry said. Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III "says everything's fine, and in one swipe replaces two of his leaders in the district. Actions speak louder than words."

But it might be the Bolton Hill incident that persuaded the Police Department leadership to make a change.

The baby's father, Travis Hardaway, said he got a call from the department's public affairs office, a visit from three officers, a call from a city councilman and another visit from police - all after a reporter requested a copy of an incident report for the robbery.

Siwei Yao, the Chinese-born nanny, said she told the first responding officers that she didn't want to go to the police station because she couldn't leave the baby, and that she was confused about procedures in the United States.

"They told me, 'Do you want us to take a report or go find him?' " Yao said. "They told me, 'It's up to you; it's your choice to have a report.' "

Police spokesman Nicole Monroe told The Baltimore Sun this week that the officers had first classified the incident as a larceny and later upgraded the crime to an unarmed assault and robbery. She described the handling of the incident as a miscommunication that would have been spotted.

But sources said commanders were angry at the Comstat meeting because officers had actually classified the attack as a "police information," a general type of report that does not show up in the city's crime statistics and which is generally taken when there is scant information.

Bailey and Mackell reportedly defended the officers, sources said, saying that there had been a language barrier. But Barksdale responded that people from his office had since made contact with Yao and had no trouble understanding her.

After Barksdale left the meeting, Bealefeld lectured commanders on the need to collect reliable information on city crime, placing much of the blame on sergeants. He said that if majors cannot oversee their sergeants, they are replaceable, the sources said.

Bealefeld also said that he has tasked the new internal affairs commander, District Maj. Nathan Warfield, who was appointed to the post this week, to identify and pursue officers who

downgrade or fail to report crimes.

The department's chief spokesman, Anthony Guglielmi, declined to confirm accounts from the commanders meeting, but he said Bealefeld has had "a collection of concerns for a while" about the Central District. He said Bailey and Mackell will be "determining their future career options over the weekend."

The shake-up comes amid a period of relative stability among the Police Department's district leadership, which has been intact since Southwestern District Maj. Darnell Brock was forced out in September. Warfield's move this week resulted in new commanders for the Northwestern District.

Smith, who assumes control of the Central District, is a 22-year veteran whose experience includes an emphasis in patrol operations and commanding district detective units.

In a department news release, Edmund Skrodzki, executive director of campus safety and security for the Johns Hopkins University, said Smith is a "proactive crime fighter and has been overwhelmingly responsive to the needs of our neighborhoods."

Baltimore Sun reporter Peter Hermann contributed to this article.

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