

White Plains' elite police unit under the gun

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An elite squad of White Plains police officers again came under fire recently in the aftermath of the fatal shooting of 68-year-old Kenneth Chamberlain Sr., and the city is eyeing changes in the decade-old unit.

Although the Neighborhood Conditions Unit has been considered fairly successful in policing high-crime areas, particularly in the city's burgeoning downtown, Public Safety Commissioner David Chong said changes are likely after a review following several controversial incidents.

The Nov. 19 shooting death of Chamberlain in his apartment by Officer Anthony Carelli, a member of the unit, drew nationwide attention, and although a grand jury cleared the officers, Chong said, the selection and training of the 12-member unit are being re-evaluated. The unit is part of the department's special operations division, along with the K-9 unit and Emergency Services Unit. They are under the command of a captain, a lieutenant and two sergeants. The commander of the special operations division is Capt. Nicholas Kralik.

"Disband the unit? No," Chong said in a recent interview. "That would be premature."

Although the Chamberlain case is likely to result in a lawsuit, in addition to two pending federal suits that claim Neighborhood Conditions Unit officers used racial slurs and excessive force against minorities, Chong and several business owners contend that the unit is effective. Though officials said it's difficult to pinpoint their success rate because they operate throughout the city in conjunction with other officers on the 195-strong force, overall crime in White Plains has dropped since the unit's inception in late 2002.

There were 198 murders, rapes, robberies and assaults in the city that year. By 2010, that number had dropped to 110, according to [FBI](#)

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statistics.

HEROES OR ROGUES?

Active officers who rack up arrests and garner high marks in their performance reviews often are selected for the unit.

These officers are "our problem solvers; they're our troubleshooters," Chong said. "They are specially trained and some of the highest decorated officers in our department."

Critics, however, charge that the squad has run amok and is inadequately trained and improperly supervised. "This is a small unit acting like rogues," said civil rights lawyer Randolph McLaughlin, an attorney for the Chamberlain family.

He called for federal authorities to investigate and take over the supervision of the squad.

Constantine Dimopoulos, a lawyer who represents two Arab-American brothers from [Yonkers](#) who are suing several officers, including three Neighborhood Conditions Unit officers, charged that the unit is "improperly trained, improperly supervised and aggressive."

"It's a horrible scene," he said, adding that he, too, wants federal authorities to oversee the unit. Dimopoulos said Neighborhood Conditions Unit members need better training in dealing with young, drunken revelers and with the minority population in the Winbrook public housing complex that they patrol.

Both Chong and former Public Safety Commissioner Frank Straub disagreed with the detractors.

NEW FRONTIER IN POLICING

Straub formed the unit in 2002 as White Plains began attracting high-end shopping malls, restaurants and a thriving bar scene.

"It used to be that White Plains rolled up the sidewalks at 5 p.m.," Chong recalled. "It's a radically different city to police now."

That renewal sparked a spate of violence, including gang-related crimes, and shifted the need for beefed-up police patrols from daytime to between the hours of 10 p.m. and 4 a.m., from Wednesday through Saturday, Straub said in a telephone interview.

"What we didn't have was a unit that would respond to our peak enforcement activity," he recalled. "The Neighborhood Conditions Union stepped up quality-of-life enforcement in crime hot spots and in the city's public housing complexes."

Neighborhood Conditions Unit cops work the worst shifts, usually overnight and weekends, and patrol the most crime-plagued areas -- the Mamaroneck Avenue bar strip and the Winbrook Houses complex.

The officers selected for the squad, Straub said, were "the cream of the crop." They received special training, including tactical response akin to SWAT team training, verbal conflict resolution,



bicycle patrol protocols and youth policing.

Members of the unit teamed up with young African-Americans from Winbrook to try to combat violence and gang activity, Straub explained. Their efforts resulted in a drop in violent crime, and the squad regularly led the department in arrests, he added.

COPS: THEY'RE NOT 'COWBOYS'

Fellow officers, who didn't want to be quoted by name, said their Neighborhood Conditions Unit colleagues are well-respected.

"They're not cowboys. They're not renegades," said one veteran White Plains officer who is not a Neighborhood Conditions Unit member. "They're good cops doing a tough job under tough circumstances."

The officer noted the challenge of patrolling the downtown bar strip after 2 a.m., when revelers from [Connecticut](#) typically descend on the city because bars close earlier there.

On a recent night, a cocktail of music, laughter and loud voices wafted from the 10 or so bars and restaurants along Mamaroneck Avenue off Post Road. Police cars cruised by. Officers eyed the bars for signs of trouble.

Neal Alpuche, the manager of the Brazen Fox bar on Mamaroneck Avenue, said Neighborhood Conditions Unit patrols often stop patrons from driving while drunk and have established a good rapport with bar employees, which helps cut down on rowdiness.

Ryan McBride, the general manager of the Black Bear Saloon, agreed.

"They're a 100 percent asset to me," he said as he stood outside his Mamaroneck Avenue bar. Bouncers can try to keep drunken patrons from getting in a car, he explained, but the police are more effective.

"They're not out here to pad statistics," McBride said. "They give people every chance to do the right thing before they arrest them."

McBride popped open his [iPhone](#) contacts that included a list of eight cell numbers for Neighborhood Conditions Unit police.

"They tell us just call them if there's any trouble and we need assistance," he said.

CROSSING THE LINE?

None of the officers in the unit would be interviewed for this story, but Chong said the payoff for them is advancement through the ranks with an eye on becoming a detective. "It's a steppingstone to promotion," he said.

The unit is among the most flexible of the city's squads -- working in plainclothes driving unmarked cars or in uniform patrolling in squad cars -- and is assigned to various high-crime areas as needed.

Neighborhood Conditions Unit members also have master keys that grant them access to every one of the 450 apartments in the Winbrook Houses. Chong said that access is necessary given the high number of calls police receive to that complex.

It was because he had a key to Chamberlain's apartment that Neighborhood Conditions Unit

Officer Steven Hart was at the scene of the deadly standoff last November.

Carelli was the target of a grand jury investigation that ended with no charges being filed, sparking outrage from the Chamberlain family.

Hart was accused of using a racial slur against Chamberlain, and lawyers for the family contend the N-word was used more than once and perhaps by other officers.

The fact that the unit has keys to the Winbrook apartments has drawn the ire of many, including Linda Berns, director of the [New York Civil Liberties Union's](#) Lower Hudson Valley chapter, who said she was "shocked" that the officers have such access.

"I've never heard of anything like that," she said. "There's no reason for police to have the keys."

Officers in other Westchester County cities, including [Yonkers](#), Mount Vernon, New Rochelle and Peekskill, don't have keys to public housing residences, officials noted.

"It's as if people who live in public housing don't have any rights," said McLaughlin, a member of the Manhattan firm Newman-Ferrara. "This is not community policing. It's police state policing."

Many Winbrook residents feel their rights are being violated, said Raymond Willard, 53, who has lived in the complex for 27 years.

"It's a problem," he said. "We feel like we don't have basic privacy here."

Relations between police and Winbrook residents have deteriorated over the years, Willard said.

"Whenever something goes down now, they don't even ask questions. They use force," he said, "They're too quick to reach for the gun."

Sandy Cespedes-Houston -- who grew up in the Winbrook complex -- said residents want police protection, but the Neighborhood Conditions Unit officers are too aggressive with residents, even those who have done no wrong.

"People would be more receptive to the police if there was more respect," said Cespedes-Houston, 38, as she sat on a bench outside the Winbrook Houses. Cespedes-Houston, who works for an insurance company, lives in Mount Vernon but takes her children to day care in Winbrook.

"If you want respect, you give respect," she said.

Monet Hodge, a baker, agreed, saying residents have grown up to fear police who roust them without cause.

"By now, they don't want anything to do with the police," said Hodge, 23, who has lived in Winbrook her entire life. "That's what causes all the extra problems."

In a statement issued by a spokeswoman, White Plains Mayor Thomas Roach did not address the allegations against Neighborhood Conditions Unit officers or the practice of giving them keys to public housing apartments.

"The mayor has indicated publicly on several occasions that if the federal government decides to investigate the (Chamberlain) case, the City of White Plains will cooperate fully," said spokeswoman Karen Pasquale.

The head of the union that represents the White Plains police force also declined to address

criticism of the unit.

"Our officers are well-trained and always conduct themselves with the highest level of professionalism and respect," said Robert Riley, the president of the White Plains Police Benevolent Association. "No amount of training can completely prevent the tragedies that sometimes happen during the difficult course of police work."

Lawyers representing Neighborhood Conditions Unit members in federal lawsuits did not respond to requests for comment. And it is not known how much the city has spent defending those cases.

Hart, an 11-year veteran, and Carelli, an eight-year veteran, are on desk duty until Chong finishes his review of the Chamberlain case and the Neighborhood Conditions Unit.

"If I think there are some areas that have to be tweaked, they will be tweaked," Chong said of the unit.

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