

Confidential Internal Draft—Do Not Distribute

Date: September 9, 2020

To: File

Re: Interview of DPD Training Academy Lieutenant John Coppedge on September 9, 2020

From: Kevin Strom, OIM Deputy Monitor

On September 9, 2020, Office of the Independent Monitor (“OIM”) Independent Monitor Nicholas E. Mitchell and Deputy Monitor Kevin Strom interviewed Denver Police Department (“DPD”) Training Academy Lieutenant John Coppedge. It was an in-person interview conducted in the DPD’s Training Academy. The interview was not recorded, and this memo summarizes the interviewers’ thoughts and mental impressions of that interview. This memo was prepared by Kevin Strom with feedback from Mr. Mitchell.

INTRODUCTIONS

Mr. Mitchell began by describing how the OIM is investigating the protest response and is trying to gather as many perspectives as possible, from command staff to line officers and sergeants, and including training academy personnel in the wake of the George Floyd protests (“GFP”). Lieutenant Coppedge said his perspective would be very broad because he saw what happened at the GFP as a symptom of what has been happening in the DPD for the last few years. He was not involved in the protest response but could comment on how the DPD responded.

“LEADERSHIP FAILURE”

Lt. Coppedge saw the DPD’s response to the GFP as a total “leadership failure.” He was not in the room where the decisions were made (specifically, the Command Post), but he said that the officers on the ground were reacting to what they saw without any sort of leadership.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

CHANGE IN EMPHASIS ON TRAINING

Lt. Coppedge discussed at length the change in attitude toward training between prior chiefs of police and the current administration. In 2008, during the Democratic National Convention held in Denver, the city saw significantly larger crowds and protests than during the GFP, though Lt. Coppedge admitted that the GFP were much more unexpected. Leading up to the DNC, the DPD prepared for the protests in part by attending FEMA Field Force trainings. Lt. Coppedge provided us with documents regarding the FEMA Field Force trainings. Former Chief Robert White was very open to partnering with other agencies for training, and ordered officers to attend FEMA’s three-day Field Force certification class, and for FEMA to return to certify trainers for refresher courses. Large in-service classes, such as the three-day FEMA Field Force class, have a major impact on a District’s patrol abilities because it removes 40-50 officers from the street for three days, and Lt. Coppedge described that widespread attendance requires a mandate from the top. Chief White and Deputy Chief Murray emphasized training and mandated that the classes be filled. Multiple times, Lt. Coppedge described how a lack of a mandate to attend trainings would lead to empty classes because Commanders and Lieutenants would not want to sacrifice their day-to-day operations voluntarily. As another example of the previous administration’s strong emphasis on training, Lt. Coppedge said that under Chief White’s leadership, the training academy had a commander, Rick Kyle (the implication was that there is no commander at the training academy now, though Lt. Coppedge did not say so).

Under the current Chief of Police, the prevailing attitude is that training is not important. Patrol/district commanders say that in-service training kills their staffing. There is no mandate from the top ordering that training classes be filled, and so classes do not get filled. Since 2020 is an election year and Lt. Coppedge believes that elections drive protests, Lt. Coppedge pushed for Field Force trainings for all officers this year. He was planning on scheduling two classes in the spring until COVID shut everything down. Even so, Lt. Coppedge again said the in-service trainings received no organizational support and that unless there is an instruction to fill the classes from the Chief, people don’t attend. One of the main problems is that commanders are required to approve three days’ pay for their patrol officers to attend a training like the FEMA Field Force course instead of being on patrol, and that the commanders will not do that unless ordered. Last year, they put on an in-service Field Force training for supervisors and only six people attended.

[REDACTED]

Lt. Coppedge asked Deputy Chief Barb Archer to begin a weekly eight-hour Field Force refresher course after the lateral recruits graduated in July. After she spoke to Chief Pazen, she said yes, to schedule it. After Lt. Coppedge brought the plan to other lieutenants (and they spoke to other command staff

members), Lt. Coppedge was told to scrap that plan, and instead to have a train-the-trainer four-hour class that could then be taught at the districts to the rank and file officers. REDACTED

[REDACTED]

LESS LETHAL, CROWD MANAGEMENT, AND FIELD FORCE TRAINING

Lt. Coppedge and the training academy no longer train on less lethal crowd management tactics or weapons, such as the PepperBall system. He said that at some point, less lethal “training” became more about inventory management and tracking, and that the academy is not suited for that, so the inventory and training went to the districts. He said it was all managed under Special Operations by Technician Grothe. He said Darren Lindsay at the range might occasionally put on a training.

[REDACTED]

After the GFP, IAB asked the training academy to review video to help determine whether various incidents were in policy. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

He described one of the biggest failures as supervisors not recognizing when officers had taken too much (abuse). REDACTED

[REDACTED] He said tempers and clarity of mind would run short, and the result was the overuse of pepper balls. He did not think pepper balls were a tool to be used for shooting at people, but instead were supposed to be shot at the ground to disperse crowds.

[REDACTED]

The training for anti-police crowd management is no different than any other crowd management, and there’s no one-size-fits-all solution. The training does show what tools are available at the police’s disposal. The RDV is a new tool they have, and even the districts now have them at their disposal, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

When asked to name possible experts in crowd management at the DPD, Lt. Coppedge named Cmdr. Phelan, Lt. Canino, and Sgt. Knutson. [REDACTED]

DPD officers' completion of training courses is tracked through Police One and a couple other training management systems (Acadis through the state and another city contract whose name he could not remember). He said that in order to ensure the crowd control training is in line with emerging best practices, the manual is updated occasionally especially with new legal guidance. The manual guides policy, and policy guides training. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] In addition to occasional refresher courses, there was maybe a 30-minute video on Field Force tactics. Last fall, Technician Grothe did a train-the-trainer on Tasers, and he might have also done a similar one for pepper ball, but Lt. Coppedge was not sure. When asked if any other agencies trained jointly with the DPD, Lt. Coppedge said no. In the past, the three-day training was open to other agencies, but only one or two students would attend from other jurisdictions.

TRAINING ACADEMY ROLE IN GFP

Asked if the Training Academy or any training officers had any role in the GFP, Lt. Coppedge said no. At one point during the first two days of the GFP, another trainer at the academy, Sgt. Knutson, while on vacation, called Lt. Coppedge to ask if he should go to the Command Post. Sgt. Knutson told Lt. Coppedge that he was seeing things done wrong and asked if he should go help. Lt. Coppedge said no, this administration doesn't want it, they'll just get mad that someone is inserting themselves.