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## Three Baton Rouge police officers arrested, another facing charges amid misconduct allegations

BY LARA NICHOLSON | Staff writer

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Baton Rouge Police stock photo, Friday, July 2, 2021, in Baton Rouge, La.

STAFF PHOTO BY HILARY SCHEINUK

Three Baton Rouge police officers, including one top official, were arrested Thursday after criminal investigations into a BRPD warehouse where alleged sexual and physical abuse took place revealed broader allegations of misconduct, a BRPD spokesman confirmed.

The following department members turned themselves in to a judge Thursday afternoon on the following counts:

- Troy Lawrence Sr., a BRPD deputy chief, on malfeasance in office, principal to obstruction of justice, principal to battery and principal to theft
- Jesse Barcelona, on malfeasance in office, principal to theft and principal to obstruction of justice
- Todd Thomas on simple battery, theft, malfeasance and obstruction of justice

Those three made first appearances in court Thursday afternoon and were booked into the parish jail. District Judge William Jordan set their respective bonds at about \$30,000.

A fourth officer, Douglas Chutz, is also facing a count of malfeasance in office but did not turn himself in Thursday.

John McLindon, attorney for Thomas, declined to comment until he could review the arrest warrant. Kyle Kershaw, attorney for Barcelona, did not respond to a request for comment.

Attempts to reach Chutz and Lawrence Sr. directly were unsuccessful.

The arrests come a day after Lawrence Sr. was placed on administrative leave because of an “administrative and criminal investigation” and one week after Barcelona and Thomas were placed on leave.

The investigations stem from two federal lawsuits claiming people were wrongfully detained and brought to a BRPD warehouse facility located several hundred yards away from the BRPD First Precinct District. The plaintiffs allege they were physically or sexually abused by officers associated with the Street Crimes Unit in an unmarked white “torture warehouse” lined with barbed wire fencing and dim street lights.

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The lawsuits say those officers called the warehouse the “BRAVE Cave,” a reference to the Street Crimes Unit’s previous moniker, the BRAVE Unit (Baton Rouge Area Violence Elimination).

Chief Murphy Paul said at a Baton Rouge Metropolitan Council meeting Wednesday the warehouse is a “narcotics processing facility” that had been used by specialized units like the Street Crimes Unit and Narcotics Division for about a decade to process detainees and package evidence.

Shortly after the allegations emerged, city officials permanently shut down the facility, disbanded the Street Crimes Unit and launched a criminal investigation into police officers in tandem with ongoing administrative investigations.

Around that time, Troy Lawrence Jr. — the son of Lawrence Sr. and a former Street Crimes Unit officer with multiple abuse allegations — submitted his resignation to the department.

Lawrence Jr., who Paul said was transferred to the unit by his father in coordination with other administrators, has since been issued a misdemeanor summons for battery in relation to an incident unrelated to the BRAVE Cave; he is accused of unlawfully using a Taser on a suspect without allowing them time to comply with verbal commands, police said.

The FBI announced last week it had launched its own investigation into the department and officers who “may have abused their authority” — a rare move for a federal agency whose longstanding policy is to remain secretive on investigations. Paul has said BRPD is cooperating fully with investigators.

The BRAVE Cave developments have become an emotionally charged subject for public officials and Baton Rouge residents who say the allegations pick at scars left by a history of misconduct at BRPD — a Baton Rouge Metropolitan Council meeting Wednesday night turned fiery as council members scolded Chief Paul, to which he angrily responded with accusations of council members undermining him.

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Among those accusations, Paul claimed council members were “in the pocket” of the Police Union, conducting backdoor meetings about the chief and staying silent as critics, whom he did not name, made racist comments about him.

“Don’t sit here and play like you don’t know about this group that tries to force the mayor to sit there and fire me for lies and say I only discipline White folks,” Paul said.

“Even in my retirement, when you know I’m leaving and there’s going to be accountability, you’re still doing what you do,” said Paul, who has announced he would be resigning in November. He later concluded his speech with, “Shame on you.”

Two council members Paul directly named in his confrontation, Jennifer Racca and Aaron Moak, said Wednesday they didn't understand where his claims were coming from and denied having secretive meetings about him. Racca called his speech a deflection from responsibility for the BRAVE Cave.

Racca, Moak and Councilwoman Denise Amoroso, all Republicans, called on Paul to resign Thursday for his behavior toward the council, Amoroso in a public statement and Racca and Moak in a co-signed letter to Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome.

"Chief Paul's lashing out with hearsay and insinuation is not the hallmark of a respected public official," Amoroso said. "For the sake of this department and the sake of this community, I urge him to resign today so BRPD can move forward."

Racca and Moak echoed much of Amoroso's sentiment in their letter, calling Paul's behavior "completely absurd" and crossing "a number of ethical and professional lines."

"Based on the Baton Rouge Police Department's own code of conduct, and the fact that the you asked Chief Murphy Paul to stand down and he did not, shows a disregard for the respect of our office as Council Members and your position as Mayor-President," Moak and Racca wrote. "As a result of his actions, we ask for the immediate resignation or termination of Murphy Paul as Chief of Police of the Baton Rouge Police Department."

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The letter concluded with a passage from BRPD's internal policy regarding command of temper and conduct unbecoming of an officer.

Councilwoman Chauna Banks, a Democrat, disagreed with her colleagues' statements, saying that Paul is held to a higher standard than other, White law enforcement officials.

"The chief wears the title of chief, but he's a human being," Banks said. "He's a father, he's a Christian, he did his job under enormous pressure. He came and made a good faith effort, everything he tried to do. My colleagues wanted him to do a magnificent job but refused to give him the tools to do it as it related to police reform, and then want to blame him for the bad cops he's tried to get rid of. You can't have your cake and eat it too."

Among Paul's accusations included one that the council stripped his legal funding, which pertained to a request in February 2022 to raise his budget for legal costs by \$80,000, which the council denied.

Mayor Broome's office released a statement Thursday in regard to the meeting saying that, as city leaders confront challenges associated with moving the city "to a brighter future," it is important for those leaders to maintain "core values of civility and decorum."

"The manner in which we conduct ourselves in these interactions not only serves as a testament to our individual integrity but also sculpts the very essence of the Baton Rouge community," the mayor said.

Councilman Cleve Dunn Jr. said Thursday he added an item to the next Metro Council meeting on Oct. 11 to discuss the BRAVE Cave with city officials again.

Chief Paul will hold a press conference at 10 a.m. Friday to announce "some accountability" in the department's investigative efforts. A BRPD spokesman declined to comment on the council members' requests for Paul's resignation prior to the press conference.

*Staff writer Matt Bruce contributed to this report.*

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