

Fox 25 investigates public funds used for controversial police training sessions

25 okcfox.com/news/local/fox-25-investigates-public-funds-used-for-controversial-police-training-sessions-law-enforcement-women-racial-ethnic-minorities-warrior-mentality-glorified-violence-street-cop-training-event

by Wendy Suares

Mon, June 3rd 2024 at 9:00 PM

Updated Mon, June 3rd 2024 at 9:58 PM

Fox 25 investigates public funds used for controversial police training sessions (Photo: Adobe Stock)

OKLAHOMA CITY (KOKH) — FOX 25 investigates your tax dollars going to a private, unregulated police training company that teaches questionable tactics.

We look into what officers were taught and how local law enforcement is responding.

A training conference for around 1,000 law enforcement officers in New Jersey in 2021 led to a scathing report last December by the New Jersey Office of the State Comptroller, titled 'The pitfalls of private, unregulated police training.'

"What we found was really disturbing," said Acting New Jersey Comptroller Kevin Walsh in a video the agency posted online, along with clips showing what was presented to officers at the Street Cop Training event.

"Instructors taught unconstitutional policing practices, teaching officers to stop motorists without a lawful basis and to illegally prolong traffic stops," said Walsh.

"They denigrated women and racial and ethnic minorities. They promoted a warrior mentality and glorified violence. They belittled internal affairs. They dehumanized civilians. They made jokes about their genitalia and harassed members of the audience," Walsh said. "And this training was paid for with public funds."

Among those excerpts highlighted in the report is a clip of an instructor telling the audience, "Have a day where you go, 'I'm just gonna pull over 20 people in a row for the sole purpose of asking them a series of questions.'"

Through an Open Records Request, FOX 25 found invoices for \$4,953 worth of Street Cop training in recent years for both the Oklahoma City Police Department and the Oklahoma County Sheriff's Office.

"There really were no red flags presented from the training our deputies attended," said Sheriff Tommie Johnson III.

Sheriff Johnson said none of his deputies were at the New Jersey conference, but what he saw in those clips was enough for him to cut ties.

"I'm certainly not okay with it," said Sheriff Johnson. "Our guys will not be attending any other Street Cop training."

One Street Cop instructor at that conference in New Jersey was a tactical paramedic affiliated with the Oklahoma County Sheriff's Office.

Sean Barnette served as a reserve deputy, a volunteer position, for 2 years until November 2021.

A video clip shared by the NJ Comptroller shows Barnette on stage at the conference saying, "We don't like treating turds, right? You're like, 'Ah, f-ck em. The ambulance can take 'em,' right? And I had a problem treating, you know, the gang bangers and the people that are pieces of sh-t of society, right?"

"How did you feel when you saw that?" we asked Sheriff Johnson.

"I tell our guys all the time no one in this agency is bigger than the brand, or the patch, or the badge that we wear. Myself included," said Sheriff Johnson. "We all represent each other. We all represent the profession. So when you have someone go out and do something like this, it puts a stain on our entire agency. On our entire profession."

The Oklahoma Highway Patrol also told FOX 25 it doesn't have any future trainings scheduled with Street Cop but didn't say why, after hosting 10 of their training sessions from 2020 to 2023.

Street Cop advertised multiple Oklahoma training sessions in the last year, including one that is listed online as 'CLEET approved.'

The Council on Law Enforcement Education and Training does accept hours from Street Cop training for continuing education.

However, their attorney, Preston Draper, said in a statement to FOX 25, "CLEET does not vet nor approve general continuing education courses for content and the receipt of a catalog number is not an endorsement by CLEET of any particular training."

"I want you to know there are 2 sides to any story," said Dennis Benigno, on behalf of Street Cop, in the video the company shared online last December.

"I want to express that while we're painted as the bad guys, we are in fact the good guys," he said.

Benigno admitted some of the language at the training conference was inappropriate, but strongly defended the content of the training.

"The truth of the matter is a thousand police officers know exactly what happened at the 2021 conference, and not one ever complained that there was anything short of great training," Benigno said.

Street Cop reportedly filed for bankruptcy earlier this year and is now operating out of Florida, while private, post-academy police training remains virtually unregulated, with no government oversight.

"Companies like Street Cop can rent a room, charge officers or departments to attend, and teach whatever they want," said Walsh. "That has to change."

So far 9 states have reportedly banned their officers from attending Street Cop Training seminars.

FOX 25 reached out to numerous other local law enforcement agencies to ask about their involvement.

We are still waiting to hear back from the Cleveland County Sheriff's Office, Edmond Police Department, and Norman Police Department.