

Complaint filed against seasonal OC officers

By Jay Hodgkins
Staff Writer

OCEAN CITY — The mother of a 17-year-old Berlin boy said she has filed a complaint with Ocean City Police Chief Bernadette DiPino over her son's treatment by four seasonal police officers.

Cheryl Leonard alleged

that officers tackled her son and placed him in a prisoner restraint device. She said he was hog-tied and thrown into a police vehicle head first.

Police considered the boy as a suspect on a store shoplifting spree, but admitted later the boy was not a suspect.

Leonard and police officials offer different accounts. Police said the boy and a friend were seen at the Division Street 7-Eleven store on June 16 and interviewed as suspects from a shoplifting incident at a nearby CVS Pharmacy that occurred a week previous. Police said the boys fit the description of two of the three suspects.

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Police said Leonard's son began yelling obscenities at the police when they told him he couldn't leave, and four officers eventually fought to put him in a restraint device, according to the police report.

"My son cooperated fully and they beat him," Leonard said, adding that her son had just arrived from Pennsylvania on Saturday and therefore could not be responsible for the CVS robbery. "They pushed him up against a van and told him he wasn't leaving. That's when one of the cops dove on him; then three others piled on top. My son was yelling, 'I'm not resisting!'"

When she visited the lock-up to retrieve her misidentified son, Leonard said his face was swollen and his body was covered in bruises. She also said she has since hired an attorney.

Not able to speak about the Leonard situation and denying any trend of overexuberant enforcement by seasonal officers, police officials are focusing on their thorough measures to detect and prevent such behavior.

Ocean City Police spokesman

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Barry Neeb said the conduct of seasonal officers is usually the subject of complaints a couple times each year. Unconfirmed tales about the actions of seasonals border on common, he said.

"Some of that occurs almost every season," said Ocean City Councilman Jay Hancock, a former town police officer. "Sometimes I suspect seasonal officers, I don't want to say overreact, but they perceive that the threat to society is a little bit greater than it is."

But the OCPD vehemently denies its seasonal officers have any tendency to act inappropriately.

"There have been zero (official) abuse of force complaints this year," Neeb said. "Does anybody reflect long enough to say they were really treated wrong, and feel the need to do something about it? No."

The OCPD has made more than 2,000 arrests this year and officers have used force on suspects 40 or 50 times this year, Neeb said. But Neeb's contention that zero official complaint forms filled out doesn't mean no one feels wronged.

In state District Court in May, Terrence L. Purnell, 19, of Berlin testified that in April an officer responding to a disagreement over a car being towed — who also happened to have

arrested Purnell in a past incident — began to follow and harass him verbally, attempting to incite him.

The officer, meanwhile, testified he was attempting to tell Purnell to leave the scene.

Purnell's girlfriend testified the officer pulled her by her shirt collar to the ground after he had handcuffed Purnell.

In another case, Kennell Baine, 26, of Dagsboro, testified in District Court in February that he had just been hit by a drunken driver last October, and had police only listened to him, they would have realized that's why he was upset without having to push him and handcuff him.

But with the lack of official complaints, Neeb, Capt. Mike Colbert and Lt. Greg Guiton said they couldn't acknowledge concerns about issues pertaining to inappropriate conduct.

"If we had that I'd have to sit here red in the face and say, 'Yeah, you're right,' but we don't have that," said Guiton.

Police chiefs from Dewey Beach and Rehoboth Beach said that because they, like Ocean City, hired mostly inexperienced, college-aged males, their agencies did have some recurring issues.

"What we find, and again it comes down to age and lack of life experience, is that they don't have to be so hard on people all the time," Rehoboth Chief Keith W. Banks said. "Not everyone who does something wrong has to be arrested. It's hard to teach

that to the young ones.

"I tell them to treat people how you'd want to be treated. Treat people how you'd want your family to be treated," Banks said.

"Sometimes I think they watch too many episodes of (the television show) 'Cops,' " said Hancock. "Sometimes the seasonals think they have to live up to the 'Cops' image, and I'm not sure that's good for law enforcement in Ocean City."

But Guiton, who is in charge of the 191-hour training program for OCPD seasonal officers, said recruits are told harshly from day one that the image of 'Cops' is the last thing they should portray as officers.

"We make sure there's no doubt about what's going on and that they handle themselves professionally," said Neeb. "It's a difficult job to learn. There's a lot of discretion and a lot to be learned to deal with people effectively. Are they perfect in their first year as seasonals? No."

Because of the ongoing investigation into the Leonard complaint, Colbert said the police could not make any comment about how officers performed in that situation.

Leonard said Friday a complaint had been lodged with DiPino and a formal complaint was being drafted for Internal Affairs.

■ jhodgkins@dmg.gannett.com