

Subject: [EXTERNAL] Fw: Detroit News 1/18/2024 Detroit police panel supervisors removed

Detroit police panel supervisors removed amid investigation into overtime, missing files
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The Detroit News
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Detroit — A pair of supervisors at the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners who have been on paid leave since March were ousted Thursday amid an internal investigation into allegations that they were compensated for tens of thousands of dollars in overtime they weren't eligible to receive.

In separate 4-2 votes, the board voted to fire or "un-appoint" Executive Manager Melanie White and Supervising Investigator Lawrence Akbar, who both have been on paid executive leave since March 24, when Detroit police officers escorted them from their workplaces.

White and Akbar have been the focus of multiple investigations, including a November report by the Detroit Office of the Inspector General that recommended White be disciplined for authorizing promotions and annual pay raises for two board employees totaling more than \$31,000.

The two former supervisors are also the subject of an internal audit into overtime they received in 2022, along with files that the former board secretary said were missing.

Detroit Police Commissioner moved Thursday to fire two police board Executive Manager Melanie White and Supervising Investigator Lawrence Akbar, whom the board fired in 4-2 votes. After Commissioner Willie Burton moved Thursday to remove White, Commissioner Cedric Banks said he thought there were multiple reasons to get rid of her.

"We have all the evidence," Banks said. "All the evidence was given last month (in the Inspector General report) about what White did. She was giving people raises."

Burton, who also moved to fire Akbar, said the former supervisor was responsible for a backlog of citizen complaints against police officers that had been filed with the board's Office of the Chief Investigator, where Akbar had served as interim chief investigator from 2020-2022.

"These are citizens' voices that have been suppressed," Burton said. "This backlog of cases has been a big problem."

Added Commissioner Linda Bernard: "There's considerable evidence that (Akbar) allowed the closure of (more than 300) cases without any investigation."

Banks also discussed during Thursday's meeting the overtime that had been paid to White and Akbar in 2022. He cited figures that had been presented to the board in September by former Secretary Victoria Shah, who resigned last week.

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Four months after Shah presented the overtime information to the board and ordered an audit into payroll anomalies and missing personnel files, board members said they're still waiting for answers about the internal review.

Questions raised in September

Shah raised questions at the Sept. 28 board meeting about files she said she couldn't locate, and overtime that had allegedly been paid to employees who didn't qualify for it. Shah gave each commissioner a packet that included a payroll summary and an affidavit from a board employee about the missing files, and she told the board she had directed Fiscal Manager Drew Fries to conduct an audit into the issues.

Prior to the vote to get rid of White and Akbar, board members said Thursday they were still awaiting word about the audit into the amount of overtime the two were paid, and what happened to personnel files that were under White's stewardship prior to Shah replacing her as the board's secretary in March.

Fries made a presentation to the board Thursday about the Detroit Police Department's budget. He did not mention his audit into the overtime and other issues, nor did anyone on the board ask him about it.

With White and Akbar now gone, it was unclear Thursday whether Fries would continue his internal audit into the questions Shah raised about the missing files and overtime.

The names of the employees whose overtime Shah questioned in September were not publicly disclosed. But the payroll summary focused on money that had been paid to White and Akbar in 2022, according to a copy of the packet Shah gave the board that was obtained by The Detroit News.

Detroit Police Commissioner Linda Bernard said Thursday that "there's considerable evidence" that a board supervisor allowed the closure of more than 300 cases "without any investigation." Two board supervisors were fired Thursday.

White logged nearly \$40,000 in overtime in five months — including \$11,151 in extra pay during a two-week period — while Akbar earned more than \$27,000 in overtime during four months in 2022, the summaries show. The overtime was earned during a project to reduce a backlog of hundreds of citizen complaints at the board's Office of the Chief Investigator, which looks into non-criminal allegations against Detroit police officers.

"As supervisors, (White and Akbar) were not entitled to overtime," Bernard said prior to Thursday's vote to get rid of White and Akbar. "This is some kind of a hustle — the fox is in charge of the henhouse here. And almost all these issues seem to go back to Melanie White and Lawrence Akbar. I don't know exactly what's going on, but I'd sure like to know."

Shah, Akbar and White's attorney Gerald Evelyn did not respond to requests for comment.

John Roach, spokesman for Mayor Michael Duggan, said the city's Human Resources Department was aware that White and Akbar were getting overtime, although he said the payments hadn't been approved by HR.

"Overtime for people in supervisory positions is not a common practice; however, it is allowable on a case-by-case basis, according to HR, if it is approved by that individual's supervisor," Roach said in a statement Thursday. "In the case of Ms. White and Mr. Akbar, that would be the Board of Police Commissioners.

"Once HR became aware the board had okayed the use of overtime to help work through the backlog of cases, HR provided Ms. White a process for logging her and Mr. Akbar's overtime hours to keep track of them," Roach said. "The Mayor directed the city's HR, IT and LEAN Process staffs to give the BOPC full support in reducing the case backlog."

It's unclear who at the board, if anyone, approved overtime for White and Akbar. There's no record in past meeting minutes of the issue being publicly discussed.

When asked whether HR had been informed by the board that overtime for White and Akbar had been approved, Roach said, "The Board of Police Commissioners has the authority to approve overtime like any other budgeted department and they had the room in their budget. HR only advised them on how to log it and process it."

Key didn't fit

During the September meeting, Shah gave the commissioners an affidavit written by Administrative Assistant Robert Brown. Commissioner Bernard requested that the affidavit be read into the record, although Pressley replied, "I won't do that," according to a transcript of the meeting.

In the affidavit that was obtained by The News, Brown wrote that after Shah was appointed secretary on March 15, she asked him for the board's personnel files.

"I stated that Ms. White had the files locked in a file cabinet in the Board Secretary office," Brown wrote. "... Ms. White was on vacation for several weeks and she had possession of the keys."

Prior to Shah's appointment as secretary, White had served as interim secretary. In his affidavit, Brown wrote that he asked White for the personnel files when she returned to work March 20.

"Ms. White state(d the) keys to the file cabinet was at her residence and she would go get them," Brown wrote. "Upon returning, I stood in the doorway of her office as she attempted to open the file cabinet. She stated that the set of keys she has will not open the cabinet, and that she must have grab(bed) the wrong keys."

Four days later, White and Akbar were escorted from their jobs by Detroit police officers. Shah wrote a memo alerting commissioners that the two had been suspended.

"They are not permitted to access any BOPC or (Office of the Chief Investigator) offices or operational systems while on leave," Shah wrote in the March 24 memo.

Former Chairman Bryan Ferguson, who was then leading the commission, released a statement a few days later explaining that "exigent actions were taken Friday, March 24th to guard evidence from being and/or further being altered, stolen and/or destroyed."

The Detroit Law Department later recommended that the board rescind the suspensions because Ferguson hadn't followed the proper procedure.

Other probes

When White and Akbar were on leave earning their respective salaries of \$91,998 and \$88,456 a year, they were part of a second IG investigation into how citizen complaints were closed at the board's Office of the Chief Investigator, which looks into non-criminal complaints against Detroit Police officers.

Chief Investigator Rev. Jerome Warfield reported at the Sept. 28 board meeting that after taking over for Akbar, he'd discovered 256 cases that had been closed without being properly investigated. According to a board memo obtained by The News, first reported in October by Outlier Media, White closed most of those cases, even though that wasn't in her job description.

Commissioner Willie Bell said he doesn't know where the audit into the overtime and missing files stands, although he said Akbar and White were qualified to handle OCI cases.

Detroit Police Commissioner Willie Bell argued Thursday that board Executive Manager Melanie White and Supervising Investigator Lawrence Akbar are "both good investigators who know what they're doing." Bell voted to keep the two supervisors. "(White) was an investigator with the OCI for 15 years, and Akbar was an investigator over there for a long time, too," Bell said. "They were both involved in getting the (Detroit Police Department) out of the federal consent judgments, and they're both good investigators who know what they're doing."

An October 2019 Detroit Inspector General report found that former board secretary Gregory Hicks had improperly hired White as a manager. The next month, the board voted 8-1 to appoint White as interim secretary to replace Hicks, who had resigned following the IG report.

In April 2020 — two days after Duggan announced he was cutting salaries and laying off thousands of city workers amid the coronavirus crisis — the board voted 6-1 to increase Akbar's salary 28%, because he was handling multiple roles.

White and Akbar changed job titles in 2022, after the city's Law Department threatened to fire them if the board didn't replace them because their employment violated the City Charter. Akbar, who had been serving as interim chief investigator, was appointed supervising investigator following the Law Department's warning.

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