

Progress in sexual assault cases praised

NOPD making
strides in consent
decree mandates

BY JIM MUSTIAN
 jimustian@theadvocate.com

A federal judge heaped praise Thursday on the New Orleans Police Department for the “tremendous progress” it has made in its handling of sexual assault cases, an area of investigation that had long been an embarrassment for the force.

“You’re taking the tough cases, and it’s not money that makes you do it,” U.S. District Judge Susie Morgan told a group of detectives attending a hearing in federal court, soliciting a decorum-defying round of applause for the uniformed men and women. “I know it’s dedication and wanting to help people and that’s a real tribute to all of you.”

Morgan received an effusive report Thursday on a series of police reforms known as a federal consent decree, a 492-point plan that Mayor Mitch Landrieu signed with the U.S. Justice Department in 2012. A significant part of that agreement, which called for the development of new policies, focused on the Police Department’s woefully deficient handling of rape cases and its often callous treatment of victims.

As a result of the reforms, which included new training and the hiring of additional detectives, the department recorded an 83 percent increase

► See **PROGRESS**, page 2B

PROGRESS

Continued from page 1B

in the number of cases it handled last year, said Tania Tetlow, a Tulane professor who leads an advisory committee that Landrieu appointed to overhaul the Police Department’s response to sexual assault. That trend has continued this year, she said, citing a projected 78 percent increase in reported cases.

“The results have been extraordinary,” Tetlow said. “I think the greatest measure of the results has been the trust shown by victims.”

Sexual assault remains one of the most undercounted crimes, and increases in the number of rapes tallied year-to-year often are attributed by advocates and police leaders to improvements in the rate of reporting. But the swelling caseload in New Orleans has created new challenges for the department,

including a pressing need to bring on even more detectives.

“We are treating people as individuals and each case on its own merit,” said Cmdr. Doug Eckert, who leads the department’s Criminal Investigations Division.

Tetlow lauded the department’s wholesale adoption of her committee’s recommendations and its application for a \$1 million federal grant intended to prevent future backlogs of sexual assault kits. “Any obstacles that would normally have gotten in our way we managed to clear,” she said.

Jonathan Aronie, the so-called monitor appointed to oversee the police reforms, told Morgan that the department has done “a great overall job,” even though ample room for improvement remains in areas like training, community policing and supervision.

“What’s important, from our teams’ perspective, is that the NOPD is taking the right steps to bring itself into full compli-

ance with the consent decree,” Aronie said. “It is most definitely doing that.”

The praise comes on the heels of an audit released by New Orleans Inspector General Ed Quatrevaux that found the Police Department has drastically improved its documentation and investigation of sexual assault cases. While detectives once routinely failed to follow national crime reporting standards for rape, the audit found, they classified 99.4 percent of those cases properly in the last quarter of 2015.

Quatrevaux previously had blasted the department for downgrading hundreds of reported rapes to “miscellaneous” offenses and filing shoddy paperwork.

The inspector general in June referred to the department’s improvements as “one of the most remarkable turnarounds I’ve seen.”

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