

Multiple settlements in cases alleging excessive use of force by Des Moines police officers – some of them named as defendants in more than one lawsuit -- prompted the question last year that led to this series: Are allegations of police misconduct taken seriously?

The short answer: Under current Iowa law, the public will never know.

Iowa laws intended to protect officers against unwarranted complaints shield from public scrutiny allegations against law enforcement officers and what, if any, disciplinary action was taken in those determined to have merit. Factor in that most complaints are investigated by an officer's own peers and there is plenty of reason to question whether the process of clearing complaints is fair and thorough.

When Des Moines Register reporters Jason Clayworth and Andrea Sahouri in early 2020 set out to document the handling of such complaints, city lawyers told them they could only review two of 200 filed against Des Moines officers over a two-year period.

That would seem to be a huge roadblock. However, they found another way to approach the question by piecing together the documents shared in legal discovery that led to the lawsuit settlements. That review provided answers about how complaints are handled and raised new questions that ultimately became the focus of their two-part series.

To document complaints against police statewide and the handling of those cases, Clayworth and Sahouri created their own digital tracking system to connect media reports involving alleged officer misconduct with lawsuits

and employment records. Over a six-month period they identified and interviewed dozens of sources linked with about 20 different cases that unveil problems associated with Iowa's police disciplinary procedures.

Among the key findings: Officers with extensive histories of misconduct were allowed to continue to work for their departments. And some who were fired landed new jobs and worked for years in other law enforcement agencies before the state took action to decertify them.

The January 2021 series came as the nation was focused on the coming trial of former Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin, who was charged and later convicted in the murder of George Floyd. Records in his case showed that, not unlike some of the Iowa officers whose cases Clayton and Sahouri reviewed, Chauvin repeatedly had been the subject of police internal affairs investigations – yet continued to work until Floyd's May 25, 2020 death.

Clayton and Sahouri's reporting showed Iowans the leniency and secrecy that allowed Chauvin to keep working had a counterpart in Iowa. That problem still was on the minds of activists when the city of Des Moines appointed one of the officers Clayton and Sahouri had written about, Sgt. Michael Fong, to conduct de-escalation training for his fellow officers, even though Fong and another officer had been the subject of an \$800,000 settlement paid to a northeast Iowa man who contended the two had beaten and severely injured him without sufficient cause.

The subsequent uproar resulted in the removal of Fong from the program and the hiring of an outside firm to conduct the instruction.