

D.C. police officer sues department claiming retaliation by superiors after complaining officers illegally targeted Black men for arrests

By [Keith L. Alexander](#)

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A 16-year D.C. police veteran has claimed in a lawsuit that the department retaliated against her after she raised concerns about the conduct of some supervisors, including allegations that officers had been instructed to conduct unlawful searches of groups of Black men and classify felony crimes as misdemeanors to make it appear crime was down.

Sgt. Charlotte Djossou, 41, who filed a whistleblower lawsuit in D.C. Superior Court last week, said she made internal complaints after hearing about or witnessing conduct that was against department protocol. She alleges that superiors then withheld promotions, wrote unmerited, negative performance appraisals and filed false disciplinary charges against her.

D.C. police spokesman Dustin Sternbeck said the department was unable to comment on pending litigation.

In the 24-page lawsuit, Djossou said she joined the force in 2004 after an honorable discharge from the Army in 2001 followed by a four-year stint with the National Guard, including a deployment to Iraq.

In 2009, Djossou said that after she passed a promotion exam, she was promoted to investigator and worked on sex crime investigations in the department's youth division. She said she was promoted two more times in the years that followed and became a sergeant assigned to Fourth District Patrol.

Djossou said in the lawsuit that in June 2015, while she was assigned to the narcotics special investigation unit, a Black subordinate officer told her a lieutenant had instructed officers to “target groups of young men of color” in predominantly Black neighborhoods in a tactic known as jump-outs. These occur when officers jump out of unmarked cars and search people without probable cause, a violation of an individual's legal rights.

Djossou, who is African American, said she reported the alleged instruction on June 30 to her superiors. On July 1, Djossou said, an email went out from top police supervisors ordering officers to stop the jump-out tactic, which is against department policy.

Two weeks later, Djossou claims in the lawsuit, superiors began excluding her from internal meetings and activities that were necessary for her job. By the end of July she said supervisors began criticizing her work. Two months later, Djossou said in the lawsuit, her performance

review was downgraded and she was recommended for discipline and criticized for poor attendance.

In June of 2018, Djossou said in the lawsuit, she was at a morning roll call when another officer in the investigative unit told colleagues to target large groups of minority men “in poverty stricken areas” of the city and search them without cause. She said the officer also told colleagues they should not turn on their body-worn cameras until after the searches were started, as opposed to before, which is department policy. Djossou said in the lawsuit that three supervisors were present at the roll call and approved the officer’s directives. She said she reported the instructions to her superiors.

In another incident that same year, Djossou said she alerted her supervisors that a White officer who reported to her had pointed his service weapon at a Black driver and threatened to kill the driver during a PCP possession arrest. Djossou saw the officer’s body-worn camera footage and determined the officer’s use of force was inappropriate, her attorney said.

In a separate incident involving the same officer, the officer arrested a Black driver and charged that person with assault on a police officer. After she and another supervisor reviewed the body-worn camera footage of the encounter, the officer — without approval, Djossou said in a recent interview — went into the system and improperly downgraded the charge to resisting arrest.

After she alerted a senior supervisor of both incidents involving the officer, the officer was disciplined, according to the lawsuit.

Later that year, Djossou said, she applied for a detective sergeant position within the investigative service bureau and was denied the promotion. She said she had been promised the promotion four years earlier by then-Assistant Chief Peter Newsham.

In 2019, Djossou reported that officers began downgrading felony thefts in various neighborhoods to misdemeanors if they thought the theft could not be solved or to avoid frightening off gentrifiers from a neighborhood.

During the recent interview, Djossou said that while she continues to work out of the 4th District precinct in Upper Northwest Washington, there has been some “tension” between her and some others in the department.

“I have colleagues that support me and I have colleagues that don’t like what I’m doing,” she said with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

In January of this year, Djossou testified about her allegations of illegal officer jump-outs and crime designation downgrades in front of D.C. Council member Charles Allen’s (Ward 6) hearing on public safety. Allen is chair of the council’s Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety, which includes oversight of the police department.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/dcpolice-whistleblower-lawsuit/2020/10/14/e65c891c-0b0b-11eb-9be6-cf25fb429f1a_story.html

Laura Marks, Allen’s chief of staff, said in an email that the office met with Djossou several times before the oversight hearing and “included questions for MPD based on those conversations.”

Marks added that Allen’s office could not comment further on Djossou’s allegations “as they are now part of active litigation before the court.”

One of Djossou’s attorneys, Roy Austin, said Djossou’s allegations, including supervisors initially promising her promotions that were later denied, were “backed up” with written memos and witness testimony. Her case is scheduled to be heard by Judge Yvonne Williams.



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Keith L. Alexander covers crime and courts, specifically D.C. Superior Court cases, for The Washington Post. Alexander was part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team that investigated fatal police shootings across the nation in 2015. He joined The Post in 2001. He previously worked as a reporter for USA Today, BusinessWeek and The Dayton Daily News. [Follow](#)