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Beverly Hills police chief retires after lawsuits alleging racism, anti-Semitism, harassment



Since she was hired, Beverly Hills Police Chief Sandra Spagnoli faced at least two dozen lawsuits or notices of intent to sue, records show. Her last day will be May 15. (City of Beverly Hills)

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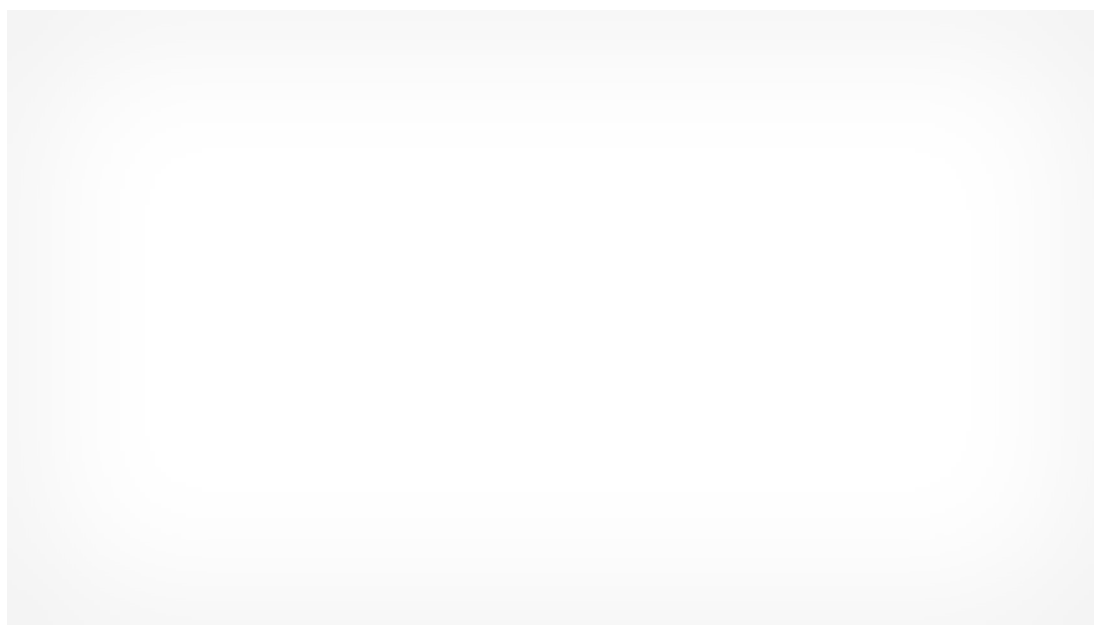
Beverly Hills Police Chief Sandra Spagnoli announced her retirement Saturday, marking the end of a rocky tenure that saw the city pay out millions to settle lawsuits alleging that she had made racist remarks to subordinate officers and engaged in acts of harassment.

Spagnoli's last day will be May 15, though she will be taking vacation time between now and that date, according to an internal department email reviewed by The Times.

“During the Chief's tenure, crime was reduced while the department increased diversity, public outreach, best practices and advancements in technology,” Beverly Hills City Manager George Chavez said in a statement. “We thank Chief Spagnoli for her service to our community and her three decades of public service in law enforcement.”

Spagnoli became the first female police chief in Beverly Hills history in 2016. A board member of the International Assn. of Chiefs of Police who previously led the San Leandro and Benicia police departments in Northern California, she received praise upon her hiring and drew a glowing write-up in Vogue. The positive press was much needed and came on the heels of the controversial retirement of the city's former chief, David Snowden, who stepped aside amid questions that he was drawing a second salary from a private sector job.

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But starting in 2018, a torrent of litigation surfaced, accusing Spagnoli of making racist comments, retaliating against officers and showing favoritism toward subordinates with whom she had sexual liaisons. All told, at least two dozen lawsuits or notices of intent to sue were lobbed at Spagnoli since she was hired, records show. As the lawsuits piled up, the city hired Michael Sitrick, a crisis public relations specialist whose previous clients included Harvey Weinstein.

In late 2018, the city spent \$2.3 million to settle a claim from Mark Rosen, a former police captain who was the highest ranking Jewish member of the department and had accused the chief of denying him promotional opportunities based on his religion and making anti-Semitic remarks.

Other claims against Spagnoli previously reviewed by The Times included allegations she had referred to the yarmulkes worn by observant Jews as “funny little hats,” asked if she had to “dress Mexican” when invited to dinner at a Latino employee’s home and reacted with revulsion when informed that an employee was gay. Some court documents contain allegations that Spagnoli had sex with subordinate officers who were later rewarded with promotions.

“To me, any employer who retains someone as long as they did in the face of so many different lawsuits from so many different long-term employees who had never brought claims of discrimination, retaliation or harassment ever in their long careers is very telling. Why did it take so long to get rid of the chief?” asked Woodland Hills attorney Brad Gage, who represented many of those making claims against Spagnoli.

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Last summer, a [jury awarded more than \\$1 million](#) in damages to a group of lieutenants who had accused Spagnoli of workplace harassment and retaliation for giving depositions that were favorable to Rosen’s lawsuit. The amount was later lowered to

\$850,000 by a judge, but Gage said he also recovered more than \$3 million in attorney's fees and court costs in that case.

Asked if there was any connection between the mounting litigation — records show another civil claim was filed against Spagnoli on March 30 — and Spagnoli's decision to step down, city spokesman Keith Sterling said the "Chief notified [the] City Manager of her intention to retire."

All told, Gage said, the lawsuits his clients brought against Spagnoli cost the city about \$8 million.

In a 2018 interview with The Times, Spagnoli denied the allegations of improper sexual relationships but stopped short of denying the allegations about racist remarks. Less than 24 hours after the interview, the city settled Rosen's lawsuit.

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"I am grateful to have served Beverly Hills and proud of the accomplishments over the past 4 years to keep this world-class community one of the safest in the nation," Spagnoli said in a statement released Saturday.

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