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Police Suspended Over Disco Fire Messages



Sun Mar 6, 6:19 PM ET

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AUSTIN, Texas - Five police officers and four dispatchers were suspended for sending computer messages after a nightclub caught fire joking about the blaze and quoting a line from the song "Disco Inferno" — "burn baby burn."

Witnesses at the Midtown Live club saw the "burn baby burn" message on the computer screen inside an officer's patrol car during the Feb. 18 fire. Police Chief Stan Knee said a commander and corporal who responded to the scene worked to calm angry witnesses.

The club has a mostly black clientele, and there were suggestions after the fire that the messages revealed racial bias in the department.

Documents released Friday indicate that after hearing a transmission about the fire, officer John Lengefeld sent a message from his patrol car to fellow officer Josue Martinez that said "burn baby burn."

Martinez replied that he was laughing, and "Those were my exact thoughts." Other officers chimed in with more than two hours of messages.

Among those receiving 15-day unpaid suspensions was officer William White, who sent a note that said, "U can smell from (Interstate) 35. It is the smell of victory."

Dispatcher Susan Negrón wrote, "I have some extra gasoline if they need it," according to the documents, and "My nite is made. I just had a lady ask me if it was burning. I said yep. She was upset. I was enthralled."

Dispatcher Ashlye Bauerle wrote, "You hear that Midtown is on fire!! The roof of a club . . . That's funny! Gives a whole new meaning to the roof, the roof is on fire," the documents said.

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Knee called the messages "inappropriate." All the suspended dispatchers and officers said they regretted their actions and that their messages were intended as jokes. A sixth officer received a written reprimand.

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The messages also indicated that the officers were tired of responding to calls at the establishment. Statistics show that police responded to 129 calls last year for reports that included a stabbing, gunshots and public intoxication. The calls made Midtown the fifth busiest club for police response citywide, according to police statistics.

Knee said a sergeant and an additional dispatcher remain under investigation.

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