

Flawed Milwaukee crime data raise questions about Pittsburgh consultant

November 21, 2014 12:00 AM

By Jonathan D. Silver and Liz Navratil / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A consultant brought in from Milwaukee to help the Pittsburgh police bureau use data to fight crime hails from a department that remains mired in controversy over how it has handled its crime statistics.

Consultant Joel Plant had two years on the job as chief of staff for the Milwaukee Police Department when it was revealed in 2012 that the force had long under-reported and misclassified serious offenses such as assaults, which affected the city's violent-crime rate.

Pittsburgh City Council last week approved a contract of as much as \$32,340 for Mr. Plant's ESM Advisors LLC.

Several members said Thursday they were unaware of the problems in Milwaukee, which the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel newspaper uncovered.

It was not clear what role, if any, Mr. Plant had with the flawed crime data. He did not return calls Thursday seeking comment, and a representative of the Milwaukee Police Department could not be reached.

Timothy McNulty, spokesman for Mayor Bill Peduto, said the scandal's origins predated Mr. Plant's arrival in Milwaukee.

Mr. Plant was the only one of five consultants who responded to a request for the proposal that the city put out last month.

The request sought an "... assessment and strategic evaluation" of the police bureau in five areas: organizational structure, leadership, analytic capacity, fiscal management and media and communications.

Acting Pittsburgh police Chief Cameron McLay and Sam Ashbaugh, director of the Office of Management and Budget, compiled a list of companies to receive requests for proposals. One was local; four out of state.

“[Mr. Plant] came up on my radar because I knew the guy, and I knew that he had done this work before,” said Chief McLay.

The two had worked for the city of Madison, Mr. Plant as a mayoral aide and the chief as a police captain.

Chief McLay told council earlier this month that Mr. Plant would help transform how the bureau uses crime data and 911 information to better deploy officers. “I want to shift us out of defensive mode, out of reactive mode into proactive,” he said. “We’re always behind the curve.”

Vendors contacted Thursday cited various reasons for not submitting bids, including lack of interest or time and what they described as a relatively cheap contract.

Wisconsin records show Mr. Plant organized his business on Oct. 13, 12 days after Pittsburgh sought proposals.

Mr. McNulty said the timing was irrelevant since the city could have just as easily awarded a contract to him as an individual.

Mr. McNulty noted that the original value of the contract, as much as \$30,000, would not have required a public bidding process, but he said the chief insisted it be handled transparently.

“It’s completely above board. We didn’t have to go through a public process,” Mr. McNulty said. “We’re not hiding anything about this. We’re excited to bring data analysis into a bureau that really, really needs it.”

It was unclear why the value of the contract increased by \$2,340.

Chief McLay said he was aware of problems with some of Milwaukee's crime statistics and had spoken with Milwaukee police Chief Edward Flynn about it.

Pittsburgh's resolution approving the contract passed City Council Nov. 10, and the mayor signed it on Friday. As of Thursday, the Law Department was reviewing the contract.

Mr. McNulty dismissed concerns about Mr. Plant based on Milwaukee's data problems.

He cited a 2012 Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission audit that traced some of the crime-reporting issues to 2006; the audit also revealed that the problem was much bigger than had previously been known.

"The report says the problems went back way before that," Mr. McNulty said. "I don't see the relevance to the questions about the data reporting with the Milwaukee system since it went back to 2006 and he joined in July 2010."

Mr. Plant, who is expected to visit several times in the next three months, arrived this week in Pittsburgh and has been at police headquarters. He is working for the man who had recently sought his advice about the top police job in Pittsburgh.

When Chief McLay was considering whether to accept the position here, he reached out to Mr. Plant and Chief Flynn for advice, in part because of how he felt that had positively transformed the Milwaukee police department.

During questioning of Chief McLay, council members generally supported using data in a more robust way to improve public safety. Few asked any questions about the vendor; only Councilwoman Darlene Harris expressed concerns about hiring ESM Advisors.

"I hope that if we're spending \$30,000 that we get correct information," Ms. Harris said. "All I can do is take the acting chief for his word since I am not the one who would hire the consultant."

Bob Donovan, a Milwaukee alderman who has been vocal about his city's crime-data problem, said Thursday that he was "concerned" upon learning that Mr. Plant was starting work in Pittsburgh as a consultant while maintaining his position as chief of staff.

Mr. Donovan said he liked Mr. Plant but said he would not be his first pick to hire as a consultant on data issues.