

'Culture of abuse': 18 K9 bite cases from past 2 years submitted for review in SLC

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<https://kutv.com/news/local/k9-apprehension-program-investigation>



Salt Lake City Police Chief Mike Brown and city leaders will speak about the investigation into the department's K9 apprehension program, which was suspended after a K9 was ordered to attack a man on April 24. (Photo: Screenshot from SLCPD body camera footage)

(KUTV) — Salt Lake City Police Chief Mike Brown announced Friday that 18 cases of K9 bite attacks have been submitted for review during an investigation of the department's [K9 apprehension program](#). The Salt Lake County District Attorney, now handling the incidents, said the disclosure by the city and SLCPD was a vital step toward restoring public faith in law enforcement.

RELATED: [Former SLCPD internal affairs sergeant on K9 bites: 'We didn't review them'](#)

Brown said the investigation brought to light several cases that merit further review. Those cases have been submitted to and will be reviewed by the Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office, internal affairs and the citizen's review board.

Kyle Harvey reports. (KUTV)

“As Chief of the Salt Lake City Police Department, I am accountable to this community, and I have major concerns when force may have been used inappropriately. Because actions speak louder than words, it is my responsibility to make sure these incidents are brought to my attention and do the right thing when they are,” Brown said.

County district attorney Sim Gill said in a statement that his office sent a records request to SLCPD after it learned of a serious K9-caused injury after it was reported by Salt Lake City media. The police

department then agreed to send that case to the DA's office for screening. A criminal case was later filed. The full statement is below.

So far, the department has reviewed 27 cases and submitted 18 for review.

- **2020:** 11 K9 bite cases, 9 referred for investigation
- **2019:** 10 cases, 5 referred for investigation
- **2018:** 6 cases, 4 referred for investigation

The officers involved in the cases under review have been put on administrative leave, per department policy. Five of the seven handlers are suspended.

"We will release the body camera footage of the incident within 10 business days from Friday," Brown said.

Brown and Salt Lake City Erin Mendenhall said the K9 apprehension program remains suspended indefinitely as cases from the past four years will continue to be reviewed.

"We are better than this, our residents deserve better than this," she said. "We will not tolerate that harms the people we will serve."

The culture of abuse that we see in these K9 incidents ends now.

Mendenhall said a termination of the K9 program may be necessary but she isn't willing to do that without study. She will determine later if there is viability in a return of the K9 police program.

"Proactively conducting this audit and turning over these cases to the DA's office is evidence of our intent, not only to correct that abuse of power, but also to ensure it does not happen again," Mendenhall said. "The culture of an organization is shaped by the worst behavior a leader is willing to tolerate. I am here to tell you that this culture ends here and now. We are better than this, our residents deserve better, and I know that the many officers of SLCPD who are committed to truly serving and protecting, will agree."

She said victims of K9 bites should contact the DA's office.

The investigation into the program was launched after Jeffery Ryans, 36, [was severely injured](#) by a K9 while being compliant to officers' orders as they responded to a domestic violence call on April 24, [court documents state](#).

Ryans' lawyers say the officers reacted with such force because Ryans is Black. They said, and [court documents and body camera footage](#) later confirmed, Ryans was following police orders and was on the ground when the officer had the dog bite him.

Officer Nickolas Pearce was [charged with aggravated assault](#), a second-degree felony, on Sept. 16.

"Ryans did not express any intentions or engage in actions reflecting he was going to resist the officers," the charging documents state. "Approximately three seconds after confronting Ryans, Pearce kicked him in the leg. Ryans dropped to his knees and kept his hands raised. While Ryans was on his knees with his hands in the air, Pearce ordered K9 Tuco to engage Ryans."

After the attack, the department's K9 apprehension program was suspended until it is reviewed by "external subject matter experts."

SLCPD says no complaint about the incident was ever filed with the department's internal affairs. Senior leaders within the department say they learned about the incident on Aug. 11 when it was reported by KUTV and other local outlets. Police leadership previously said that's when an internal affairs investigation was launched to find out:

- If the use of force was within department policy
- To find out why the incident was not reported to internal affairs in the first place

[DA statemen after SLCPD K9 cases turned over](#) by [LarryDCurtis](#) on Scribd

ACLU of Utah released the following statement after Friday's announcement:

"Today's announcement confirms that Salt Lake City Police Department is not immune from excessive force and police abuse. Indefinitely suspending of the use of police dogs against suspects is the right first step.

We call for not only a transparent and thorough investigation of these incidents, but also a deeper audit of more use of force instances by SLCPD and across other police agencies in Utah. We call for transparency into these identified incidents and accountability regarding specifics of these incidents, the individuals involved and aware of the possible misconduct, and the responses taken prior to today's announcement.

We also call for transparency and accountability into the Police Department's internal procedures used to investigate incidents of excessive force throughout the entire force to permit accountability in real time."

