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SDPD to bring back mediation program

By: North County Times wire services

SAN DIEGO - A newly received grant will enable the Police Department to reinstate dispute-intervention procedures that can resolve complaints from the public with a handshake instead of a court ruling, authorities said Thursday.

During a pilot run two years ago, the Citizen-Police Mediation Program proved successful in defusing lower-level grievances against officers, SDPD Chief William Lansdowne told reporters.

Such complaints -- typically involving issues of procedure, courtesy, professionalism and the like -- often can be best addressed through face-to-face talks overseen by a trained mediator, according to department officials.

Reviving the program with a \$15,000 grant from the private Gerald T. and Inez Grant Parker Foundation will help the SDPD's ranks "provide the highest level of law enforcement professional service that we can," Lansdowne said.

It also promises to lessen the investigative workload of the department's Internal Affairs Unit.

The service, run in partnership with the National Conflict Resolution Center, will be unavailable in more serious complaint cases, including allegations of excessive force or race-based harassment.

Additionally, no officer will be able to use the procedures -- which can prevent negative marks on personnel records -- more than three times a year.

Organizers expect to handle around 40 cases over the next 12 months, the period of underwriting the grant will provide, NCRC President Steve Dinkin said.

Dinkin called the program an "alternative to the legal system" that allows the disputing "individuals themselves to come up with a solution."

"It is important that the San Diego Police Department take these complaints seriously," he added.