

Arrests show need for police oversight

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For those of you who woke up Wednesday morning to news of the arrest of six officers of a special Philadelphia police narcotics unit, no, you are not stuck in some bizarre version of the movie *Groundhog Day*. It did just happen yet again.

In the late 1980s, there was the Five Squad corruption scandal, in which members of a Philadelphia Police Department elite narcotics unit were found guilty of years of corruption, including theft, extortion, and drug dealing.

In the early 1990s, there was the 39th Police District scandal. Five officers were charged with corruption, including lying on official reports, stealing, and fabricating evidence. In that scandal's wake, Mayor Ed Rendell settled a lawsuit against the city by creating a system of oversight, which included monitoring and an independent integrity and accountability officer (IAO). Nine years later, federal court-supervised monitoring by the original plaintiff's lawyers had ended, and Mayor John Street's office declared that the IAO had outlived its usefulness, while a Fraternal Order of Police spokesman said police corruption was minimal and no longer a major problem.

Yet the city again faces a scandal involving alleged corruption, theft, and fabrication by narcotics officers. Hundreds of cases that were handled by them have already been dismissed, and hundreds more are under review by the District Attorney's Office. If convicted, the officers could face lengthy jail sentences.

The city needs to stop pretending that all is well with the department and paying lip-service to the idea of police self-monitoring and accountability. City leaders need to face reality. Police corruption happens. Those with a stake in a system that values arrests, prosecutions, and self-preservation, to the exclusion of reform and critical self-examination, are not capable of policing the police. An independent integrity officer with broad powers and adequate resources must be brought back.

Writer George Santayana warned that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Isn't it time for the city of Philadelphia to heed that warning and free its citizens from regularly reliving this nightmare?