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Sheriff's memo upsets gay community

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A memo in which Santa Cruz County Sheriff Al Noren called the gay community "vicious and devious" has outraged gay leaders and has a county supervisor calling for the sheriff's department to start gay sensitivity training for deputies.

Noren sent the memo to county Supervisor Gary Patton, who had asked the sheriff to investigate a complaint of harassment from a gay man. Copies of the memo went to the other supervisors.

Noren defended the language in his memo, indicating that it accurately re-

'I've found (the gay-lesbian community) to be vicious and devious at trying to achieve their goals.'

— Sheriff Al Noren, in memo to county supervisors

flected his feelings about some of the dealings he has had with the gay community.

Gay leaders call the memo a setback in efforts to improve communication between the gay community and the sheriff's department.

"It was highly offensive and outrageous and demonstrates his true attitude toward us as a community and his ignorance of who we are as a community," said Samara Marion, a Santa Cruz attorney and gay activist.

The gay community and Noren have been at odds since the arrest last fall of several men on sex charges at Vista Point off Highway 1 near Watsonville. Noren met in December with gay leaders to discuss the arrests. He then agreed to appoint

a liaison to meet regularly with gay leaders.

Blair Griffith, co-chairman of the Lesbian and Gay Community Center, said, "The picture he is painting of us is not a very pretty picture, and I'd like to know what we've done. All we've done is ask him to sit down and talk."

Supervisor Fred Keeley called Noren's comments "a step backwards."

"If (gays) believe there is anti-gay attitude or approach by the sheriff's department, I think it needs work and leadership of the sheriff to solve that problem."

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Supervisors distressed at clash between sheriff, gays

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Noren sent the Jan. 10 memo, which was leaked to the gay community, after a gay man wrote to supervisors that a deputy subjected him to "degrading interrogation" while walking to a gay bar. Patton asked Noren to investigate the incident and discipline the deputy if he were found to have harassed the man.

Noren said the gay man had appeared suspicious and was in an area where burglaries had occurred recently. He wrote that the man seemed to be "uptight about being checked out and thought he could utilize the incident to demonstrate he was

being harassed."

"The encounter had nothing to do with my establishing rapport with the gay-lesbian community, which thus far I've found to be vicious and devious at trying to achieve their goals," Noren wrote. "They seem to want preferential treatment based on their sexual preference."

Noren said in an interview that when he told members of the gay community in December that he would appoint a liaison, they asked him to sign a news release announcing the appointment.

"I don't know what would be the sense in making a press release," Noren said. "It

turned out they had already written (one) with my name on it, without consulting me at all, which is very devious."

Noren said a young man at the meeting referred to a deputy that he had met at a north coast beach as "obviously a Nazi." The sheriff said he considered the remark "rather vicious."

He said another gay leader had told the press that the sheriff at the meeting had "likened homosexuality to some disease."

Noren said the quotation was taken out of context, and, "That's kind of vicious."

Noren said he believed that the com-

plaining gay man's letter was also vicious because he accused a deputy of something "with no logic in mind."

Several county supervisors said they were dismayed at what one said was name calling by the sheriff and at the communications breakdown.

Patton asked the sheriff to institute gay sensitivity training for deputies. He urged the sheriff "to work with the gay and lesbian community to build rapport and to help eliminate any perceived or actual harassment."

"There continues to be unfair treatment

of gay and lesbian people by others in the community, and it is important that government institutions . . . help eliminate this," he said.

Deputy Police Chief Mike Dunbaugh of Santa Cruz said that when homosexuals are victims of harassment or violence by other residents or law enforcement officers, they seldom report it. He said homosexuals "have the opinion that police don't care, so why bother." He added, "We vehemently disagree with that and want open lines of communication so (homosexuals) would make police reports when they are victimized."