

LAPD sergeant sues over discipline over social media posts on Nipsey Hussle, other topics

An LAPD sergeant alleges in a federal lawsuit that his rights were violated when he was disciplined by the department for controversial posts on his personal social media pages.

(Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

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A Los Angeles police sergeant who was repeatedly disciplined over controversial posts on his personal Facebook and Instagram accounts is suing the LAPD and its top commander for violating his constitutional rights, alleging they punished him simply for expressing political viewpoints they didn't like.

Sgt. Joel Sydanmaa, a 24-year veteran of the department who lives in Orange County, claims in his federal lawsuit in U.S. District Court that he has “never done anything improper on the job,” yet was reprimanded twice and briefly suspended for “expressing his opinions, as a private citizen, while off-duty, on his personal social media accounts, about matters of public concern.”

Sydanmaa alleges the punishments — which followed posts he made about Muslims, the appointment of Brett M. Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court amid sexual assault allegations, and the shooting death of the late rapper Nipsey Hussle in South L.A. — were doled out solely because his opinions “run counter” to the LAPD’s “preferred political stance.”

Josh Rubenstein, an LAPD spokesman, said the department could not comment on ongoing litigation.

In 2015, Sydanmaa posted an image making multiple false claims about the treatment of Muslim people in Japan, under the headline, “Japan keeps Islam at bay by putting restrictions on Islam and ALL Muslims.”

Sydanmaa said he was officially reprimanded by the department after a complaint was filed by the Council on American-Islamic Relations. A CAIR representative did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

In 2018, Sydanmaa wrote a post on Facebook — which he said he was doing “as if I’m in uniform” — that selectively picked apart allegations made by women against Kavanaugh and concluded that “there’s no way that Kavanaugh can be proven guilty.”

Sydanmaa claimed an unidentified complainant accused him of “shaming” Kavanaugh’s accusers, and that he was again reprimanded by the department.

In 2019, after the killing of Hussle, who was a beloved figure in parts of L.A., Sydanmaa took to Instagram to accuse Hussle of being a gang member and suggest that public remembrances of his positive impact on the community were misplaced — writing that Hussle “perpetuated the criminal gang lifestyle and the anti-police sentiment in this country” with his lyrics and “chose the lifestyle that ultimately killed him.”

When the post went viral, Sydanmaa argued back and forth with commenters, writing to one detractor, “Next time you need help, call a Crip, not 911.”

Again the LAPD launched a review of his post, and suspended Sydanmaa for one day, he said.

Sydanmaa claims in his lawsuit that other officers and commanders — including LAPD Chief Michel Moore, who is a named defendant in the case — have expressed their own political positions in public and while in uniform without repercussions, including by kneeling with Black Lives Matter protesters during recent demonstrations in the city.

Sydanmaa claims the discipline imposed on him harmed him “psychologically, reputationally, and emotionally,” and has significantly reduced his “prospects for promotion and advancement” within the LAPD and hurt his ability to secure outside employment after his retirement from the force.

He is seeking an injunction from the court to stop the LAPD from controlling his online political speech moving forward, and seeking unspecified compensatory and punitive damages for the actions already taken against him.