Deputy is given prison in jail plot

By Victoria Kim

Citing an erosion of public trust in the justice system, a federal judge Monday sentenced a Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy to 18 months in prison for obstructing a grand jury investigation into abuses inside the county jails.

James Sexton, 30, was convicted in September of obstruction and conspiracy charges after prosecutors accused him and six other sheriff's officials of trying to stymie a federal investigation into excessive force and corruption among deputies guarding the county's jails. Sexton and others hid a federal informant from his FBI handlers, according to evidence at trial.

"People are invested in our system of justice," U.S. District Judge Percy Anderson said at Sexton's sentencing. When law enforcement officers break the law, Anderson said, "It literally results in the erosion of the public's confidence ... and you don't have to look very far to find out that's true."

Sexton had the least experience among the group of law enforcement officers convicted in the case. The group included two lieutenants and two sergeants, as well as two other deputies. The six others received sentences ranging from 21 to 41 months in prison. Anderson said Sexton had the choice to stand up to corrupt orders from superiors but instead participated in the conspiracy in "a misguided attempt to protect the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department."

"You don't serve the public by using your position to cover up abuse in the Los Angeles County jails," the judge said.

Anderson said that despite Sexton's extensive contact with federal investigators and testimony before the grand jury, during which he said he was aware his actions broke laws, the deputy had been "totally unrepentant" about his part in the obstruction.

At two trials this year, Sexton's attorney described him as an overeager, inexperienced deputy who was simply following orders when he worked to move inmate Anthony Brown, who was working with FBI agents to gather information about abusive deputies, around in the jails under fake names. The first ended in a mistrial after jurors voted 6 to 6; a second jury convicted him earlier this year.

Sexton's attorney, Thomas O'Brien, had asked for a six-month sentence. O'Brien argued that in his grand jury testimony, Sexton had "openly, robustly, repeatedly admitted his guilt."

"As a defense attorney, it was ... challenging to hear a defendant admit his guilt, but as a man, I was proud of James Sexton for having done so," he told the judge.

Assistant U.S. Atty. Brandon Fox countered that because Sexton never entered a guilty plea or testified against his co-defendants, his cooperation ultimately meant little to the prosecution's case.

Sexton, who remains relieved of duty without pay from the Sheriff's Department, is expected to begin his sentence in February.

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