

Sawicki: Military reservists, double-dipped, owe Suffolk thousands

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Photo credit: NY Office of the State Comptroller | Suffolk Comptroller Joseph Sawicki has asked the district attorney to prosecute seven past and current law enforcement officials who got county pay while serving as military reservists and owe Suffolk a total of nearly \$381,000.

The Suffolk comptroller has asked the district attorney to investigate seven past and current law enforcement officials who got county pay while serving as military reservists and owe Suffolk a total of nearly \$381,000.

Comptroller Joseph Sawicki made the request to District Attorney Thomas Spota as he began collecting \$2.311 million from 53 other military reservists who served as far back as the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and who have agreed to settlements.

Sawicki made the request Wednesday in a letter to Spota asking him to investigate six deputy sheriffs and one former police officer. He did not make their names public, but said they owe amounts ranging from \$40,700 to \$84,900, and have refused repeated efforts to recoup the money.

"It has become clear to me these seven are trying to avoid or evade paying what is rightfully owed the county and its taxpayers," Sawicki said. ". . . No employee should collect two paychecks for one job."

A spokesman for Spota's office declined to comment.

Anthony Prudenti, president of the deputy sheriffs' union, said he had requested an extension of talks, claiming deputies were originally told they owed less.

"We've been in constant dialogue and it's unfortunate it's gone to the DA's office," said Prudenti. "These are . . . guys who served their country. No one's trying to duck their responsibility. It's just a question over the amount due. Every case is a little unique and that's in dispute."

Sawicki sent the letter as part of an ongoing audit aimed at unraveling issues involving a benefit approved in 1991 for county employees called up as reservists. Employees can collect their county pay while on military duty if they later turn over their military salary if those wages are lower than their county salary for the period, or their county salary if the military pay is higher. The benefit was devised to ensure that reservists' families would not suffer hardship or have paychecks interrupted.

Sawicki said problems arose with some reservists because no countywide process was ever set up to monitor the military pay or collect repayments. Since Sawicki's audit began, county labor officials have negotiated new agreements with police, deputy sheriff and correction officer unions, setting up a uniform way to recover money.

Sawicki said 53 current or former police officers made payment agreements by a Dec. 31 deadline. One officer who retired in 2008 on disability has not responded to county request for repayment.

One sheriff's deputy paid in full by a Jan. 31 deadline for deputies, while talks continue with two others and six have refused payment. Sawicki said talks are also progressing with 19 correction officers, whose deadline is at the end of this month.