

Atlanta mayor backs police chief despite scandal in death of woman, 92, during botched raid

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ATLANTA -- Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin says she stands behind Police Chief Richard Pennington despite the scandal and indictments that have followed the fatal shooting of a 92-year-old woman during a botched drug raid.

The officers who were indicted last week were the product of bad character and not bad training, Franklin said Monday.

Federal indictments released last Thursday say Atlanta narcotics officers -- including others not implicated in the shooting case -- repeatedly lied to judges in order to obtain search warrants, falsely claimed confidential informants purchased drugs and falsified warrants so they could meet goals set by police brass.

The allegations were part of the plea deals negotiated by prosecutors with narcotics officers Gregg Junnier and J.R. Smith in the November killing of Kathryn Johnston during a "no-knock" drug raid. A third officer will defend himself in court.

But Franklin dismissed suggestions she has lost confidence in Pennington, a former New Orleans police chief.

Instead, she highlighted Pennington's accomplishments during his five years in Atlanta, such as lowering the city's crime rate and increasing the size of the police force.

"It never occurred to me that the people of Atlanta would want to reverse the trend," Franklin said when asked if she had considered dismissing Pennington.

Federal officials have said Johnston's death indicates a culture of misconduct in the Atlanta Police Department and will continue to investigate. Smith and Junnier claimed that police officers seeking warrants claimed falsely that homeowners had weapons or posed other threats.

Pennington told reporters Thursday that officers were not trained to lie and did not have performance quotas. He said the Johnston case "has been a very painful five months for the police department."

He has announced policy changes to require the department to drug-test its nearly 1,800 officers and require top supervisors to sign off on narcotics operations and no-knock warrants.

Franklin, who was elected mayor in 2001, had named Pennington as police chief in May 2002. He had been police chief in New Orleans for eight years, where he was widely credited with cleaning up the department, and had run unsuccessfully for mayor of that city in March 2002.