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NEWS

# LA's Sheriff Denies He Knew About 'Degrading' Strip Searches Of Women -- Back When He Was A Lieutenant

By [Frank Stoltze](#)

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Myeshia Williams (center) is one of 93,000 plaintiffs in the class action lawsuit filed against the county over strip searches of female inmates. She is flanked by plaintiffs' lawyers Lindsay Battles (left) and Barry Litt (right). (Photo by Frank Stoltze/LAist)

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When he was a lieutenant at the women's jail in South L.A., Alex Villanueva commanded deputies who carried out "highly invasive visual and body cavity searches under inhumane conditions," according to a civil rights lawsuit that has led to one of the largest monetary settlements in L.A. County history.

Villanueva -- now L.A.'s Sheriff -- served at the Century Regional Detention Facility (CRDF) in Lynwood for two-and-a-half years, from November 2011 to May 2014. That was during a nearly six-year period when female deputies forced as many as 60 inmates at a time to disrobe and submit to body cavity searches and verbal abuse on the filthy floor of a giant open garage.

In a 2015 memo to plaintiff's attorneys, the county said Villanueva knew about "strip search policies, procedures and practices" as well as the "training and supervision" of jail deputies "regarding strip searches and the manner in which they were conducted."

Lindsay Battles, one of the plaintiffs' lawyers, said Villanueva "was responsible for what was going on ... he was responsible for the oversight and training of strip searches."

On Friday, Villanueva said through a spokesman that department policy prohibited men from being present during strip searches of women, and that he had no involvement in the process.

"The Sheriff, as a male Department member, had no involvement in any of these processes, as they were all handled, taught and monitored by a cadre of all female CRDF staff," the spokesman, Capt. Michael W. Hannemann, said.

The facility is the largest local women's jail in the country. It holds more than 2,000 inmates.

The class action lawsuit covered the period from March 2008 through January 2015, when the county ended strip searches for all but pregnant inmates, moving to fully clothed inspections using electronic body scanners.

On Monday, attorneys for the county and for the 93,000 plaintiffs in the suit submitted to a federal judge a settlement that would require the county to pay \$53 million to resolve the case.

The county denied liability, noting that it agreed to the deal "merely to avoid the expense of further litigation," according to the settlement agreement. The County Board of Supervisors approved the settlement earlier this year.

The judge is expected to approve the settlement on August 12. Once that happens, the plaintiffs will have the opportunity to file claims for a share of the money.

As part of the agreement, \$3 million of the settlement will be paid to outside consultants who will come up with recommendations for how to improve the treatment of female inmates.

One former inmate described how deputies would often verbally abuse women during the strip searches.

"You stink, you're fat, what do you have a body like that for," Myeshia Williams told LAist.

The group searches typically occurred in the evening, after the women appeared in court.

Williams, 40, said some women faced harsher treatment than others.

"If you're disabled or overweight or something, they [made] you sit on the nasty floor and spread yourself open," she said. The open air garage floor was littered with urine, feces, menstrual blood, "whatever you name on a dirty alley street."

The lawsuit said menstruating women had to publicly identify themselves and remove soiled tampons or pads in public view, often visibly bleeding.

Under the 4th Amendment, strip searches are allowed, said plaintiff's attorney Lindsay Battles.

"The legal question in this case is whether the manner in which the searches were conducted was reasonable," she said. "The federal court found that the searches were not reasonable because there was no correctional purpose to doing the searches in large groups without privacy."

Plaintiff's lawyers argued the way the strip searches were conducted was particularly egregious because most of the inmates had previously suffered sexual and/or physical abuse. They said a former captain at the jail testified that that was the case for 70% of the inmates.

The lawsuit was initially filed in 2010. But the sheriff's department -- under former Sheriff Lee Baca -- refused to do anything about the problem and continued the practice for another nearly five years, said plaintiff's attorney Barry Litt.

"That's quadrupled the size of the class and it's quadrupled the amount of money to deal with the problem," he said. "So just that one decision, or that one failure by the county, has literally cost taxpayers tens of millions of dollars."

The department improved the situation marginally in Feb. 2014 when it enclosed the garage in sheet metal and installed space heaters, Battles said.

The county said in a statement that the settlement "represents a significant resolution of a deeply troubling period."

For former inmate Williams, though, there are lasting impacts.

"I can't even look at the police the same. Every time I'm around them, I'm nervous," she told LAist. "I can't even take my clothes off in front of my doctor ya know to go for a check up because it's like I feel dirty, I feel nasty."

**UPDATE, July 19, 5:30 p.m.:** This article and the headline were updated to reflect a comment from a Sheriff's Department spokesman.

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