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LAPD detective accused of embezzling witness protection funds

Police say he took more than \$30,000 that was intended to aid three witnesses.

By Richard Winton, Los Angeles Times

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A veteran Los Angeles police detective has been charged with embezzling more than \$30,000 in city funds that were supposed to be used to protect and relocate three witnesses to crimes in South Los Angeles. Det. Leonard Avalos, 44, is expected to be arraigned next week on one charge of embezzlement by an officer and six felony counts of grand theft, authorities said Friday.

Avalos was taken into custody without incident Thursday by Los Angeles Police Department detectives while he was off duty in Placentia, LAPD Det. Gus Villanueva said.

LAPD investigators discovered the alleged theft in the fall of 2008 when they questioned some of the detective's accounts of the witness protection funds he had requested from the department, officials said.

At the time, Avalos was investigating assaults, including shootings, police said. In such cases, victims often fear for their safety and are willing to testify only if they are given money to move away from the location of the crime.

Avalos, a 17-year department veteran, could not produce receipts to verify that he had given the money to the witnesses, according to prosecutors. Authorities said police questioned the three witnesses and learned that one had received \$100, another had received \$500 and the third received no city funds.

Police suspect that Avalos began pilfering the witness funds dispersed to him by the LAPD Fiscal Operations Division in February 2008.

The amounts he allegedly stole each month escalated, according to prosecutors. He is accused of stealing \$6,000 in March 2008. Two months later, the amount increased to nearly \$7,000; in June 2008 it topped out at more than \$13,000, according to court documents.

Avalos was placed on home leave by the LAPD about a year ago, once the investigation revealed the extent of the missing funds.

If convicted, Avalos could face up to six years and four months in prison. On Friday, Avalos was in Men's Central Jail in lieu of \$120,000 bail.