

Police Plan Held A Spy Operation

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By Paul W. Valentine
Washington Post Staff Writer

Black activist Reginald H. Booker charged yesterday that Project Progress, a federally-funded community relations program, operated as a spy system, assisting D.C. police in monitoring dissident political activity and forewarning them of trouble during the urban disturbances of the late 1960s.

Booker told a D.C. City Council committee investigating police intelligence operations that he understood that some Project Progress staff workers also carried weapons and received military training from the U.S. Army. He said he personally observed several workers throwing rocks at U.S. marshals during a campus takeover by students at Howard University in May, 1969.

John Stagers, a former assistant to Mayor Walter E. Washington who supervised Project Progress, denied all Booker's charges.

Booker, a member of the Black United Front and a long-time dissident activist, described Project Progress as a scheme hatched in the White House ostensibly as a "cool it" operation during urban riots but actually as an intelligence gathering apparatus.

Originally called "Black Buffers," the organization grew to 45 staff members under Stagers and set up ten "youth centers" in the inner city, where members picked up rumors about potential or planned disturbances, Booker testified.

Many Project Progress workers also were members of local black activist and civil rights groups, he said, and thus were able to report plans of those organizations.

He said staff workers wore "similar identifying African shirts" and had easy access to police during disturbances.

Pressed by committee chairwoman Willie Hardy (D-seven) for details on how staff workers reported their information, Booker acknowledged, "I don't know who they reported to."

He said he relied chiefly for his information on unnamed sources in the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, which funneled support money to Project Progress.

He said the sources told him some work-

ers carried weapons and received military training at Ft. Meade, Md.

"I categorically deny they were police informers," said Stagers in a telephone interview after Booker's testimony.

He said the organization consisted primarily of former convicts paid by a combination of federal and private funds to dispel false rumors and act as a buffer between police and the community.

"These guys put their lives on the line at a time when the city was seriously threatened," Stagers said. "These were honorable men and should not be discredited."

He acknowledged that they often picked up information about impending disturbances but did not feed it to the police. "They dealt with it themselves," he said. "That would have been a very dangerous role to play, being stoolies."