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**Abuse and Cleveland's duty**
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Cleveland (Tennessee) Police Chief Wes Snyder has claimed that he and his department did not have enough information until January, 2009, to launch the investigation that in 2010 resulted in two officers being convicted of statutory rape of underage girls and using drugs with the girls.

**A mother's call**

Snyder's claim obviously doesn't take into account the fact that one of the girl's mothers called the police department in May, 2008, to complain that one of those officers was coming around her home to see her daughter, that she found his attention inappropriate, and that she wanted the police department to make the officer stay away from her daughter.

That's the latest finding by this newspaper's reporters that conflicts with Snyder's claim. Earlier evidence that the department knew Officer Dennis Hughes was suspected of criminal behavior with an underage girl surfaced when the police department's assistant chief, Gary Hicks, testified in an unrelated civil case last month.

In his testimony, Hicks said that he had told Snyder in May of 2008 of reports that some officers were using hydrocodone and having sex with young girls. Chief Snyder's response, he testified, was to tell him to meet with the officers and "get their attention."

In a review of the files on the investigation that finally led to the officers' convictions, our reporters discovered that Hicks, after following the chief's order, wrote a "Memo to file" on May 29, 2008. In that memo, he wrote that he held a meeting attended by the city of Cleveland's Personnel Director, Jeff Davis, and nine officers -- two captains, three lieutenants, a sergeant, and four patrolmen -- to warn the officers about inappropriate conduct.

"No accusations were made; however, the officers were warned about unbecoming and unacceptable behavior including, but not limited to, dating minors, porn on City-owned phones, consumption of alcoholic beverages while off-duty, snorting crushed pills, oral sex in public, and running from other law enforcement agencies," his memo said.

**The chief's response?**

It's virtually inconceivable that Chief Snyder would not have been advised of the memo, especially since a mother of one of the girls ultimately found to be a victim of statutory rape had called the police department around that time to complain that Officer Dennis Hughes was trying to see her daughter, who was then 14 years old.

The mother, whose name we are withholding to protect her daughter's identity, told our reporter that Hughes met the girl after she had run away from home and had been returned by the police department. Police records show that occurred on May 16 and 17, 2008. Former Cleveland detective Suzanne Jackson also confirmed to reporter Judy Walton that the girl's mother reported Hughes'

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behavior then, and that she (Jackson) discussed the report with a senior detective.

Jackson said she was told the report should be passed on verbally but did not need to be put in writing. In fact, the Cleveland Police Department's written policy requires, in a detailed section, that all citizen complaints be recorded, put in writing and investigated, and that an evaluation of the complaints be filed along with the complaint.

The policy says the chief of police will review all complaints against officers.

Ultimately, Officer Hughes pleaded guilty to aggravated statutory rape and aggravated assault and served nine months in jail. Officer Nathan Thomas pleaded guilty to two counts of statutory rape, forgery and possessing drugs with intent to sell. He is serving a six-year prison term. The Cleveland District Attorney's office said three girls, ages 14, 15 and 17, were victims of statutory rape.

But the investigation into those crimes did not begin until December of 2008, and only then because two on-duty officers -- Chris Mason and Jonathan Hammonds -- visited Hughes at his residence while he was off-duty and ended up in a pill party that led to a gunshot wound to Mason's hand.

### Unresolved issues

One central issue that remains to be resolved is whether the Cleveland Police Department violated the law by failing to timely report or to investigate suspected child abuse, as well as other suspected misconduct by its officers, seven months earlier. If the department leaders failed their sworn duty to act in a timely manner and simply looked away, they would have violated the law and failed their public duty.

Their inaction might also have allowed child abuse to continue and do further harm to the girls when it could have been stopped.

The city of Cleveland should determine why the city's director of personnel and police department leaders failed to promptly investigate the charges articulated in Hicks' May 29, 2008 memo. The TBI, which was brought into the investigation of this case in December, 2008, after the gunshot wound, also should account for its silence on the Hicks memo and any findings of unreported child abuse.

Regrettably, the district attorney's office seems stunningly uninterested in delving into this issue.

There should be consequences for neglect of duty, especially involving child abuse and official misconduct. Penn State University, for example, has just fired its president and its legendary coach, along with the two officials who failed to report Jerry Sandusky's alleged child abuse on its campus to the police, and four investigations are underway.

Looking away, and allowing child abuse to continue to avoid a possible scandal, should not be sheltered in silence, and tacitly condoned. The citizens of Cleveland deserve a much higher level of accountability from their public officials. Why can't they get it?

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