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Mother's complaint to police in Cleveland didn't lead to probe



by Judy Walton
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Cleveland, Tenn., Police Chief Wes Snyder
Photo by [Patrick Smith](#).

A mother's complaint early in 2008 that a patrol officer had inappropriate contact with her teen daughter apparently was treated as an informal matter and never written down or investigated, as Cleveland Police Department rules required.

Officer Dennis Hughes was arrested Jan. 4, 2009, with a 15-year-old girl, alcohol and pills in his truck, records show. He later pleaded guilty to statutory rape and aggravated assault.

But the 15-year-old's mother said she tried in May of that year to report that Hughes had been coming by her house and paying inappropriate attention to the girl.

Cleveland Police Department Complaint Policy

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It was just about the time of a May 29, 2008, meeting during which several officers were warned against dating minors, snorting crushed prescription pills and viewing porn on department cellphones, among other offenses. Hughes had been summoned to the meeting but was not there. He was briefed later by his supervisor, Lt. Steve Tyson, police said.

The mother, who is not identified here to protect her daughter's identity, said Hughes met the girl after she ran away and was brought home. Cleveland police records show that was May 16 and 17, 2008.

"Within two weeks, definitely," the mother said, she called Detective Suzanne Jackson at the Cleveland Police Department to say the officer's attentions to her daughter made her uncomfortable.

She didn't allege any criminal behavior against Hughes but wanted him to stay away from her house.

Jackson said she asked the woman whether she wanted to file a formal complaint or let the department handle it internally.

"She [the mother] said, 'I just want it to stop,'" Jackson said.

Jackson, a 19-year-veteran of the department who was fired in June, said she had just been promoted to detective. She said she was unsure how to handle the mother's call, so she spoke to Mark Gibson, senior detective and her mentor in the Crimes Against Persons division.

She said he told her that if the mother didn't want to file a formal complaint, she should just meet with Hughes and tell him, without making accusations, that he needed to stay away from the girl.

Jackson later spoke to Tyson, who confirmed that Hughes had told him about her warning to stay away from the woman's daughter.

None of the three officers apparently filed any paperwork documenting the mother's complaint.

But a written departmental directive states, "The policy of the Cleveland Police Department is to record and investigate fully each verbal or written complaint or allegation of misconduct against the members of the department."

Gibson, now a lieutenant, is taking courses at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va., police spokeswoman Evie West said Monday. A message left for Gibson at the academy Monday was not returned.

West said she passed a request for comment to Tyson, who is on third shift. He did not respond by presstime Wednesday.

Hughes apparently has left Cleveland and could not be reached for comment.

No proof

Police Chief Wes Snyder has said his department had no proof that officers were snorting crushed hydrocodone, having sex with underage girls and other offenses before December 2008, when Hughes shot another officer at his apartment and an investigation began that brought out details about the drugs and teenage girls.

Officials in 10th Judicial District Attorney Steve



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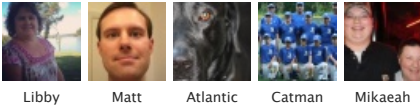
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Bebb's office who prosecuted Hughes and officers Nathan Thomas and Jonathan Hammons, said Wednesday there was little Snyder could do with nothing to go on but gossip.

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"The word 'complaints' carries connotations," said Steve Hatchett, an assistant district attorney. "You're giving them facts, you're giving them names, you're giving them addresses -- none of that ever happened.

"There were rumors about all these officer being involved with pills -- painkillers -- but nobody had any concrete information they [police officials] brought to us," Hatchett said. "If they had had the proof, the would have brought it to us."

Asked last week whether documenting the mother's complaint could have gotten the investigation going more quickly, Snyder said by email, "All files are available to you on any closed case. I have not read the file. The court or D.A. could provide you with that quicker than I. If memory serves me, he [Hughes] was prosecuted and convicted for that."

The district attorney's office said the statutory rape investigation began in January 2009, after the mother reported her daughter had run away again and the Bradley County Sheriff's Office found her in Hughes' truck.

Hatchett said that, based on interviews with the 15-year-old, two other victims were identified -- one 14, one 17. Hatchett said the 15-year-old denied having sex with Hughes before November 2008.

Hughes and Officer Nathan Thomas already were under investigation for involvement in illegal use of prescription drugs.

In 2009, Hughes was charged with aggravated perjury, making a false report to an officer, aggravated reckless assault, aggravated assault, reckless endangerment, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, statutory rape and aggravated statutory rape. He eventually pleaded guilty to aggravated statutory rape and aggravated assault, and the other charges were dropped. Hughes served nine months in jail and was placed on probation.

Thomas pleaded guilty to two counts of statutory rape, forgery and possessing drugs with intent to sell. He is serving six years in the Southeastern Regional Correctional Institute at Pike-ville.

In October, Snyder said Jackson was fired for mishandling evidence. Newspaper archives quoted Bebb as saying he would not prosecute any cases she handled.

Jackson had no comment on the firing Tuesday.

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about Judy Walton...

Judy Walton has worked 25 years at the Chattanooga Times and the Times Free Press as an editor and reporter focusing on government coverage and investigations. At various times she has been an assistant metro editor, region reporter and editor, county government reporter, government-beat team leader, features editor and page designer. Originally from California, Walton was brought up in a military family and attended a dozen schools across the country. She earned a journalism degree ...

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inquiringmind said...

Who is this guy with the 5 stars on his collar, fancy gold-braid on his hat and American flag on his sleeve, the General of the Army or a local wannabe?

He reminds me of the days of my early childhood when we dressed up and played "army."

December 8, 2011 at 8:08 a.m.

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lookinfour said...

I just don't get it with the police and now the DA's office. They keep saying all they had was a "rumor" of these crimes. A "rumor". We're not talking about office type gossip. We're talking about felony crimes. What does a responsible police department do with "rumors" of felony crimes committed by police officers. Open up an investigation to confirm or squash these rumors. Do something other than write the "rumors" on a white board and say don't do any of these. Give me a break. Run the rumor back to the source. Does this really have to be explained to an investigator, or Chief of Police, on how to do? Please tell me they know how to investigate a rumor....

December 8, 2011 at 9:21 a.m.

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AmyK said...

Why in the world did Hughes serve only 9 months? That makes no sense whatsoever!

December 8, 2011 at 9:58 a.m.

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dao1980 said...

These slimy dishonest jerks make it extremely difficult for honest hard working coppers to wear the badge without getting constantly boo-ed by the folks they serve.

December 8, 2011 at 10:07 a.m.

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GARRS said...

Its because they have a man whos job is to pick and choose what cases get probed. Probing ALL issues are expensive, because we allow ourselves to be overcharged for everything and everybody.

They only pick to probe issues that have a high degree of potential sucess, and avoid the ones that are problematic. Hate you tell you this, but if this is often the case, they will probably want to raise taxes to go further, but one other situation is evident.

Paid officials do not like adding situations where money was spent and nothing gained, beacuse it is a blackmark. Dont matter if they are elected or appointed, the pressure to perform is the same.

Officials are NOT like you. They have protection on their jobs, and unions and fraternities that force high pay for their positions. YOu can hardly fire them, you can not force them to stand and work 10 hours in a stretch for minimum wage, because they are highly trained and expect reasonable pay. Unlike the rest of us, who are forced to live hand to mouth

December 8, 2011 at 12:38 p.m.

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lookinfour said...

Garrs, internal affairs and Asst. Police Chiefs are already on the payroll and working. What additional expense is there to asking questions? None. Only if real serious crimes, which these are, are discovered during questioning does more resources and expense come into play. I think anyone would agree that if evidence was found early on of teenage rapes and drugs by police this is a worth while expense.

December 8, 2011 at 12:47 p.m.

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01centare said...

Glad tfp has someone with the balls to finally expose some of this stuff that's been going on for a number of years. Now if goings on at some of these other police depts. could receive equal

attention they could be forced to clean house and start from scratch with real individuals with the honor and integrity to serve and protect.*

December 8, 2011 at 4:22 p.m.

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McRand said...

Seems to me that there was more than enough "rumor" to suspect serious infractions being committed by law enforcement officers amongst themselves and upon vulnerable minor girls. Why was there not a sting set up to bring all the criminals to justice as would be done in any other like situation? Did Snyder fail to "Serve and protect" as is his sworn duty? Why didn't any other of the professional law enforcement officers suggest a sting to bring justice about and maintain the integrity of their profession? Why does it look more like a cover up than concern for bringing to justice those officers abusing drugs and committing statutory rape?

December 8, 2011 at 7:56 p.m.

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ceeweew said...

I agree, McRand, this is starting to really stink. I think Snyder needs to go, if for nothing more, for failure to supervise...When cops investigate cops we are usually left with more questions than answers...In this era of anti-regulations, we are told to let industry,i.e. banks, universities, corporations, etc..., police themselves, for some, that seems like an idea with merits...But when the fricken police cannot police themselves, it is really an insult to all police and to all who do "serve and protect" their communities with integrity and honor...Good Cops need to quit turning a blind eye to the scum within their ranks.

December 8, 2011 at 10:37 p.m.

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macropetala8 said...

ceeweew said... I agree, McRand, this is starting to really stink. I think Snyder needs to go, if for nothing more

Snyder needs to go? And be replaced with what? A duplicate? You and others have to understand that this is the mindset of most police departments around the nation. Why would they want to correct something they themselves have likely been guilty of at some point and time in their careers? They saw nothing wrong with what these *fine upstanding 'gentleman'* {sarcasm} cops were doing because their acts are part of the cop culture. I can assure you, what you see taking place here and how it was dealt with can be found in most every law enforcement dept. and agency around the nation.

December 9, 2011 at 9:55 a.m.

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