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Tampa police: Officer fired for having sex with teen

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Brian Morales

TAMPA — Tampa police arrested one of their own Thursday, charging a school resource officer at Blake High School with having sex with a 17-year-old female student at the school.

Brian Morales was charged with eight counts of felony sexual activity with a minor. He becomes the latest in a string of officers who have been terminated this year after being accused of breaking the agency's code of conduct.

“Each of them have brought discredit to the Tampa Police Department,” said police Chief Jane Castor. “We are an outstanding organization. Very disappointed in the actions of the individuals in the past. Specifically in this one because he was entrusted to be a positive influence in those individuals lives.”

The investigation into Morales began after the girl's mother heard her daughter speaking to the officer on speaker phone Tuesday night. During the conversation, Morales told the girl he would hurt himself if their relationship became public, said Laura McElroy, a police department spokeswoman.

The mother called a school official, who called police.

Police detectives went to the girl's home and to Morales' home on Wednesday to investigate. Because Baker had threatened to hurt himself, he was taken into custody under the Baker Act.

Castor talked to Morales on Wednesday and told him he would be terminated and the charges he faced. Morales cried and appeared remorseful, McElroy said.

On Thursday, Morales, 36, was released from the mental health facility and brought to police headquarters. He didn't cooperate with investigators, Castor said.

He was arrested and fired.

According to police, Morales and the girl began having sex two months ago. On Oct. 24, she left Blake High and went to Morales' home, where they had sex, police said.

They had sex at least eight times at his home, her home and in Morales' personal car, police said. On most meetings, she would sneak out of her home to meet Morales, who was off duty at the time of each encounter, police said.

The last time they were alone together was Dec. 12, police said.

“He certainly doesn't deserve to wear the Tampa Police Department uniform,” Castor said. “He has not upheld the high standards that we are held to in this department. In fact, he has discredited all law enforcement.”

“The fact that he was a school resource officer who deserves the trust and respect of the students they oversee is just disgraceful,” she said.

Morales, who earned \$61,838 a year, had worked for the police department for seven years. He became a school resource officer at Blake High in January 2012. The only record of discipline in his personnel file was a letter of counseling for losing his police radio after he left it on top of his car and drove off.

School resource officers apply for the position, interview and are vetted. Supervisors look at applicants' experience, maturity and interest in working with students, Castor said.

The Hillsborough County School District on Thursday sent a recorded message from the Blake High principal to the parents informing them of Morales' arrest and his inappropriate relationship with a student.

“We are saddened, shocked and disappointed in the behavior of the school resource officer,” Blake High Principal Jacqueline Haynes said in the statement.

Blake High senior Taylor Lovejoy said he was surprised to hear the news but said students had noticed the female student and Morales were often together at school.

“The girl was always hanging around the resource officer,” said Lovejoy, 18. “I never thought anything of it, but obviously something was going on,” he said.

Castor has fired at least three other Tampa officers this year. Sgt. Ray Fernandez was fired after he was accused of helping set up the DUI arrest of a lawyer involved in a case with two rival disc jockeys. Det. Jeanette Hevel was fired and charged with grand theft after being accused of stealing \$1,900 in IRS money orders that had been placed in the police department's evidence room. Sgt. La Joyce Houston was arrested and fired after being accused of using an inmate's food stamp card.

Reporter Nick Williams contributed to this report.