

Parents irate at Woodstock cop's punishment

November 27, 2013 | By Dan Hinkel, Chicago Tribune reporter

chicagotribune.com

A 12-year-old girl got a series of text messages this summer from her mother's boyfriend, Woodstock police Sgt. Charles "Chip" Amati, according to copies of the messages obtained by the Tribune.

One message, punctuated with a text emoticon shaped like a heart, read, "Send me some sexy pictures!"

The girl's mother said she alerted authorities, and Illinois State Police investigators discovered something else — that Amati had used a taxpayer-funded law enforcement database to research his girlfriend's criminal record, a police report shows. Officers who use the database for personal reasons can be charged with official misconduct, a felony, state police said.

But McHenry County State's Attorney Louis Bianchi has not charged Amati. After a departmental inquiry, Amati, a 24-year veteran and one of the city's highest-paid employees, was suspended without pay for 30 days, though he can take them one at a time at the department's discretion within a year, police Chief Robert Lowen said.

Authorities have not suggested that Amati's text message broke any law. Experts said a mental health assessment would be key to determining whether the message was an isolated act or part of a larger problem.

The chief said Amati wasn't required to undergo a mental health assessment or counseling. Lowen said he did not think either was necessary.

The girl's parents are furious about what they say is light punishment for a city insider who they think should have been fired. Her father, who the Tribune is not naming to avoid identifying the girl, accused law enforcement officials of hypocrisy.

"He's no better than who he's arrested," the father said.

Lowen and Assistant State's Attorney Michael Combs declined to comment specifically on the text message.

In addition to having access to the database that includes information about driving records, gangs and licensed drivers, Amati coordinated the department's access to the system and was responsible for monitoring misuse, Lowen said.

An officer who coordinates his agency's database use and misuses the system should be fired, said Terry Mors, a former Gurnee police commander and the director of Western Illinois University's School of Law Enforcement and Justice Administration. Misusing the database is an abuse of power, Mors said, adding, "If you're doing this, what else are you doing?"

Lowen, who recommended the discipline to the city's police and fire commission, called Amati's conduct "unacceptable." But the chief defended him as a good officer and said, "I thought that the

discipline was appropriate in light of all the circumstances."

Lowen acknowledged that misuse of the database can lead to criminal charges but said he thought the suspension was fair, in light of Amati's otherwise spotless disciplinary history, long record of service and the fact that he didn't use the database for a purpose such as his own financial gain.

In deciding not to charge Amati, prosecutors weighed the fact that he would face departmental discipline, Combs said.

"This guy made some serious mistakes, but I have to consider the background of somebody too," he said. "He'd been a police officer for a long time, and he made a mistake."

Amati could not be reached for comment.

His name might be familiar to those who follow local news because he is the department's spokesman, along with overseeing dispatchers and records, the chief said. A city budget document projects that Amati, 48, of Woodstock, will make about \$93,000 in the 2013-14 fiscal year, though any potential overtime payments are not included in that total.

The girl's mother told the Tribune she started dating Amati in spring 2012. This summer she was unhappy to learn that he had given her daughter a gold pendant emblazoned with the word "Princess," she said.

She went to his home to confront him, she said. She cursed at him, he gave back the key to her home and she stormed off, the woman said.

The next day, she told the 12-year-old and the girl's 10-year-old sister to delete his number from their phones and let her know if he tried to contact them. The older girl then came forward with the text messages, her mother said.

In one exchange, dated Aug. 16, Amati sent a message reading, "Hi beautiful" and then told her to "feel free to send me a pic any time," capping the request with a winking emoticon.

Three days later, according to copies of the messages, he requested "sexy pictures." The girl did not respond to that request.

Responding to a Tribune request for records of the investigation, state police cited laws restricting the distribution of information about children. But police did release the report showing that officers confronted Amati about his use of the Law Enforcement Agencies Data System, known as LEADS.

Amati admitted running his girlfriend's name and said he knew that using the system for personal inquiries was forbidden because he coordinated LEADS use for his department, state police wrote.