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Worcester cop resigned after alleged sex chat with undercover trooper

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WORCESTER — A veteran Worcester police officer resigned in October after he allegedly shared sexual messages with someone he believed was a 14-year-old girl. The teen was actually an undercover state trooper working on a prostitution sting.

Former Police Officer Neil J. Shea, who identified himself in chats as a 45-year-old police officer from Worcester, resigned Oct. 13 while an internal investigation was under way, disciplinary records obtained by the Telegram & Gazette through a public records request show.

Police Chief Gary J. Gemme reviewed the investigative materials on Jan. 3 and sustained several allegations against Mr. Shea.

Allegations of incompetence, neglect of duty and conduct unbecoming an officer were sustained in the Worcester Police Department Bureau of Professional Standards investigation. After reviewing the report, the chief recommended firing Mr. Shea, but the officer had already resigned.

Allegations of failing to report illegal activities and not assisting someone in need were also sustained by Chief Gemme. In total there were six violations by the officer, the records show.

Mr. Shea was allegedly involved in a Yahoo.com chat room discussion and used the handle "Latenightcop171." Mr. Shea's badge number was 171.

The report states Mr. Shea thought he was speaking with a 14-year-old girl. He apparently identified himself in chats by his name, badge number and gave out a cellphone number that investigators identified as his, according to the reports.

"The conversation was sexual in nature," the report states.

No charges have been filed against Mr. Shea.

A reporter left messages for Mr. Shea at his home. City records show the 21-year veteran sought retirement benefits from the city. That was on the agenda for a Retirement Board meeting Oct. 18.

Chief Gemme ordered an investigation into the matter in late September. On Sept. 29, then-Officer Shea was placed on administrative leave.

In early 2012, Worcester police agreed to participate in a multi-jurisdictional investigation targeting sexual predators. Involved were the Worcester district attorney's office, Fitchburg police, Northboro police, federal agencies and state police detectives.

State police detectives posted an online advertisement in an effort to keep an eye on chat rooms and monitor people looking for sex from underage girls, the records said.

The sting, called Operation Checkout, took place in late September and involved posting an advertisement on Backpage.com, a

website that lists escort services.

"The purpose of this sting operation was to develop a strategy to target individuals with a sexual interest in the on-line solicitation of sex from prostitutes and juvenile females," the report states.

Part of the sting involved undercover state troopers chatting online. Troopers began chatting, or typing and transmitting online messages, with a person they believed was a Worcester police officer.

Transcripts of the Sept. 28 chat were in the public records requested by the Telegram & Gazette. The identity of the handle used by the undercover state trooper was redacted. A few portions of Latenightcop171's chat were redacted as well. Mr. Shea was a police officer at the time of the chat.

In the chat, Latenightcop171 is told that the girl is 14 and she is from Fitchburg. They chat about the girl being home alone and Mr. Shea allegedly tells the girl he is a police officer.

"So you want to learn things," Latenightcop171 says, according to the transcript.

"What can you teach me?" the undercover trooper responds.

Latenightcop171 asks for a picture, but the trooper states she has no camera. Latenightcop171 asks if she was "being naughty" with her computer camera in the past.

At one point, Latenightcop171 talks about going to the girl's home.

"And when I knock on the door the SWAT team arrests me lol, (laugh out loud)" Latenightcop171 writes.

"There is little doubt that at this point 'Latenightcop171' knew what he was doing was wrong based on his remarks referring to getting arrested," a Worcester Bureau of Professional Standards investigators wrote in a report.

The chat moves toward Latenightcop171's job. The undercover trooper asks if he can wear his uniform if he visits her.

"Maybe another time," Latenightcop171 replies.

Worcester police investigators were made aware of the chat by a trooper involved in the sting. The Worcester investigator said the chat was stopped because Mr. Shea had not made any offers, broken a law or crossed the line, and those involved in the sting should move on to more promising subjects, the report states. Mr. Shea was never charged with any criminal offense.

Worcester police asked to interview the troopers involved in the sting. Bureau of Professional Standards investigators were told of the sexual nature of the chat. Another state police detective told Worcester investigators that the cellphone number given in the chat was tracked.

"I then queried the address on the secure RMV site, found the name Neil Shea attached to the address, and further queried and found that the subject was issued a firearms license to carry," the trooper said. "His license to carry showed him in a Worcester police uniform."

Mr. Shea was asked on Oct. 2 to answer several questions put forth by the chief. He asserted his right to remain silent on almost all of the 19 questions. He only confirmed that he worked in the Worcester Police Department operations division on a day shift, records show.

A Bureau of Professional Standards investigator notes in a report that Mr. Shea should have seen the "red flags" in the chat, especially when learning of the age of the girl, who was actually an undercover state police trooper.

Worcester internal investigators said Mr. Shea had opportunities to remove himself from the chat or assist the "teen" and talk to her about the dangers of online chatting with strangers. Mr. Shea could have reached out to law enforcement and he had an obligation as an officer to act on behalf of the "teen."

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