

Albany County sheriff's sergeant resigns over sexually explicit texts to teenage girl

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An Albany County sheriff's sergeant abruptly resigned Friday as the department investigated allegations that he had inappropriate contact with a teenage girl in Watervliet.

The resignation of Sgt. Martin F. Zaloga Jr., an 18-year veteran of the department, was fallout in a widening investigation in the city of Watervliet that led to the arrest last week of Joshua Spratt, a city police officer, who was indicted on charges accusing him of having sex with an underage girl while working as a school resource officer.

Sheriff Craig Apple confirmed that Zaloga, 45, who was the department's STOP-DWI coordinator, had resigned as part of an investigation that had a "nexus" to Spratt's case.

"He was suspended yesterday and served with a notice of discipline regarding our intention to seek his termination," Apple said Friday. "He came in today and resigned."

The sheriff said an anonymous Facebook page that was set up on Thursday included information about Zaloga's contact with a teenage girl. The Facebook page, which was taken down after a few hours, was apparently set up to defend Spratt, he said.

An immediate internal investigation revealed that Zaloga had exchanged sexually explicit text messages with the teenage girl, according to an official familiar with the case. The girl and Zaloga first met when she was enrolled in the sheriff's office's Explorer Program, which is set up for young people between ages 14 and 21 who may be interested in a law enforcement career.

The two police officers' contacts with teenage girls, some of whom worked in internship programs for the Watervliet Police Department, came to light after another Watervliet police officer, Nick Pontore, resigned a month ago when his name surfaced in an undercover drug investigation. Pontore allegedly refused to submit to a drug test and quit the force when he was confronted by supervisors.

Pontore was acquainted with Donald Kodadar, 25, of Watervliet, who was arrested last month on drug charges as part of a broader investigation by the state Attorney General's Office and State Police.

In an email to the Times Union on Saturday afternoon, Pontore said that he and his brother owned a house on 4th Avenue where Kodadar lived before his arrest, but they never lived with Kodadar. Pontore also denied refusing to submit to a drug test.

"I never even failed a drug test by any contractual agreement for the police department in 8 years," he wrote.

After quitting the department, Pontore, 28, gave information about Spratt's contact with underage girls to a Watervliet police lieutenant, according to a person briefed on the case. The matter was then turned over to the State Police, who launched an investigation that led to Spratt's arrest on a seven-count indictment handed up by an Albany County grand jury.

On Saturday, Pontore said the evidence he turned over to a lieutenant was a video but he did not elaborate on its content. He also alleged that a Watervliet woman brought her teenage daughter to the police department -- before the investigation of Spratt was launched -- and alleged the officer was sleeping with her.

"The police department blew her and her mother off and continue(d) to let Officer Spratt work while never investigating his cell phone," Pontore wrote.

The investigation also led Pontore's brother, Kevin, to resign from his job as a correction officer at the Albany County Correctional Facility. Another person briefed on the case said that Kevin Pontore quit his job when sheriff's officials confronted him about allegations that he may have had another correction officer talk to Kodadar about text messages he exchanged with Nick Pontore.

Like his brother, Kevin Pontore quit his law enforcement job rather than submit to a drug test or give a statement to internal affairs investigators, an official close to the case said.

Meanwhile, the person familiar with Spratt's case said that Watervliet school officials had contacted Watervliet police Chief Ronald Boisvert about two months ago with concerns about Spratt's interaction with girls at the high school.

The concerns included allegations that Spratt, who had an office at the school, often had female students in his office but had placed paper over his glass door so that no one could see inside.

Boisvert could not be reached for comment on Friday night.

Spratt, 34, is accused of having sexual relations with two teenage girls, ages 16 and 17. The seven-count indictment unsealed last Monday alleges Spratt had oral sex with the 16-year-old girl between Feb. 15 and April 10 in the parking lots of two cemeteries in Watervliet and Menands, on Third Avenue in the city of Watervliet, and in the parking lot of the Watervliet Elementary School.

Following Spratt's arrest, Boisvert characterized the allegations as "shocking" and said that Spratt "hadn't exhibited any of this type of behavior to us."

The chief said when the department became aware of the allegations, he immediately turned the case over to State Police on July 21.

Spratt, who is married, faces multiple years in prison on felony charges that include four counts of third-degree criminal sex act. Each count carries 1 1/3 to 4 years in prison, which could run consecutively. Spratt also was charged with misdemeanor counts of child endangerment and official misconduct. He has pleaded not guilty and was released on \$50,000 bail.

During a news conference following Spratt's arraignment last Monday, Albany County District Attorney David Soares said evidence against Spratt includes "phone communications, text communications, videos."

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