

Former sheriff's lieutenant indicted on multiple charges

A former New Hanover County Sheriff's Office lieutenant was indicted on 122 criminal charges Monday by a New Hanover County grand jury.

The grand jury was reviewing the findings of the N.C. State Bureau Investigation into the actions of former sheriff's office Lt. Joey LeBlanc. LeBlanc, second in command of the sheriff's vice and narcotics unit, was fired in June amid allegations he mishandled drug evidence and violated department policy on truthfulness.

He is charged in the indictment with 28 counts of obtaining controlled substances by fraud; four counts of obtaining property by false pretenses; four counts of embezzlement; four counts of altering, destroying, stealing evidence; four counts of obstruction of justice; 21 counts of misdemeanor possession of schedule II controlled substance; 28 counts of trafficking, 4 to 13 grams; 14 counts of trafficking, 14 to 27 grams; and one count of trafficking, 28 grams or more.

LeBlanc's bond was set at \$500,000 by visiting Judge Jack Jenkins, a Superior Court judge from Morehead City. Jenkins added the caveat that a residential treatment program should be explored and the bond amount would be reconsidered.

"The concern I think all of us have is treatment and recovery, especially under these circumstances," Jenkins said.

During the course of the bond hearing, a slightly clearer history of LeBlanc's alleged history of substance abuse emerged.

LeBlanc was injured at work and prescribed pain medication and, said J. Michael McGinness, his attorney, "became less than the officer he had been."

The lieutenant's first encounter with opioids happened in 2006 and he began abusing the drugs in 2008, Jenkins read from court documents.

Family members recalled "(sitting) on him for a week on end, but he always relapsed," Jenkins read.

LeBlanc did voluntarily submit to a live-in rehabilitation facility in California at some point.

He "'completed program and was placed back in the narcotics unit where he was exposed to the very types of medication that had addicted him," McGinness said.

Once back at work, LeBlanc relapsed.

Adren Harris, an assistant attorney general assigned to the case by the N.C. Attorney General's Office, said LeBlanc's crimes happened between May 2011 and April 2013.

LeBlanc's criminal activity began following what Harris called "a reverse drug operation," in which the sheriff's office requested prescription pills from a pharmacy with the approval of an area judge

LeBlanc forged the signature of that judge and another on 28 total occasions at two local CVS pharmacies.

"I think he was egregious in how he carried out these crimes, the fact that it got to the point he felt the need to forge a judge's signature," Harris said.

On June 6, about two months after his dismissal from the sheriff's office, LeBlanc failed a drug screen with what Jenkins described as "fatal amounts" of morphine in his system.

By all accounts, LeBlanc was an exemplary law enforcement officer before developing his substance abuse problem, and the defense prepared a "matrix" showing how well-regarded his performance was.

"It has been one of the most exemplary sets of personnel records that I've ever seen," McGuinness said.

Jenkins cast a more skeptical eye on LeBlanc's record, though, noting that performance reviews regularly pointed to his interest in learning more about narcotics and the case law around them.

"From a law enforcement perspective that can be read one way, but for someone that is (an abuser) of narcotics, that can be read a different way," Jenkins said, adding some would read that and think of the so-called common wisdom that arsonists tend to be firefighters.

LeBlanc's attorneys produced cases, including one from 2007 and one from 2009, that justified LeBlanc's interest in expanding his understanding of narcotics.

District Attorney told Jenkins the DA's office and judges in New Hanover County recused themselves from the case because LeBlanc reportedly forged the names of members of the DA's office and Judge W. Allen Cobb on documents.

The District's Attorney's office has dropped 31 total counts of drug charges against nine different defendants because LeBlanc handled the cases.

Harris said LeBlanc would be held in Wake County. David said such an arrangement is standard in cases involving law enforcement because of possible relationships with the officers holding them and other inmates, who they may have helped incarcerate.

It will likely take the state a year to 18 months to bring LeBlanc's case to trial, Harris said.

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