

Hartford police sergeant sues city and chief over alleged harassment by a ‘favorite’ officer in department

By REBECCA LURYE

A Hartford police sergeant is suing the city and top police officials, claiming they are protecting a favorite patrol officer who has been harassing him with negative comments and wolf whistles.

Sgt. John Zweibelson, a patrol shift supervisor, complained in October 2019 after, while listening to police radio channels, he overheard a subordinate officer disparaging him to a dispatcher, calling Zweibelson “a tool” and a “total absolute tool box,” according to the lawsuit he filed in federal court Monday.

He claims it took seven months for an outside investigation to conclude the officer, Domenick Agostino, had violated the

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Code of Conduct in his radio transmissions. Then in July, the department reportedly opened an internal affairs investigation into a hostile work environment between Zweibelson and Agostino, and has kept the investigation open for the past five months.

“An open internal affairs investigation is a career-paralyzer because it compromises a police officer’s eligibility to be promoted and serves as a death knell to an officer seeking employment with another police department,” Zweibelson’s attorney, Norm Pattis, writes in his complaint. The city has not yet filed a response to the lawsuit.

Pattis is also representing a

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lieutenant in a discrimination lawsuit against the department. There are at least four other suits pending against the city brought by current and former officers and, in one case, the Hartford Police Union.

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Zweibelson, who has been with the department since 2003, named the city, Police Chief Jason Thody, Assistant Chief Rafael Medina and Deputy Chief Dustin Rendock in his suit.

The harassment began with the conversation Zweibelson heard over the radio last fall, in which Agostino also reportedly told the dispatcher that Zweibelson hadn’t responded to some of her attempts to reach the sergeant, according to the lawsuit.

Then, according to the lawsuit, Agostino offered to buy the dispatcher coffee for a month if she would “fleet” the sergeant, or broadcast a message across the department’s radio channels that Zweibelson was not responding.

This would serve to embarrass Zweibelson, the lawsuit claims.

The dispatcher, Adele Muraski,

did not fleet him, though she stated that Zweibelson “really is the worst,” and she and Agostino continued to denigrate him, according to the lawsuit.

Zweibelson immediately reported the incident to the Hartford Police Dispatch Center and the next day to his squad commander, Lt. Sean Michel, who is the plaintiff in one of the other lawsuits pending against the city.

Zweibelson also filed an official complaint with Michel and Capt. Gabriel Laureano, who listened to the dispatch tape and agreed that Agostino should be disciplined, the lawsuit states.

Human Resources assigned the case an outside attorney, Russell Jaram of JacksonLewis in Hartford, who concluded in May that Agostino had violated the department’s code of conduct.

Human Resources then turned the matter over to Hartford police. It’s unclear whether Agostino was disciplined.

However, over the next two months, Agostino repeatedly whistled “in a cat-calling manner” at Zweibelson whenever the sergeant walked by, made derogatory comments to him and ignored Zweibelson’s orders to wear a face mask, the lawsuit states.

On July 14, another sergeant also spoke with Zweibelson about not wearing his mask

at a roll call. Two days later, Zweibelson was notified that Thody had opened the internal affairs investigation into complaints of a hostile work environment. Zweibelson was ordered to avoid contact with the officer, according to the lawsuit.

In early August, Medina also asked Agostino to wear a mask during a roll call. After, the assistant chief held an informal meeting at which he ordered Zweibelson not to attend any more roll calls with Agostino, despite Michel, the lieutenant, and Laureano, the captain, protesting the order and pointing out that shift supervisors are needed at roll calls, the lawsuit claims.

Zweibelson supervises 10 to 20 officers, and uses roll call to inspect officers’ equipment, brief them and address any problems or concerns, the lawsuit states.

Medina “reacted very hostilely to their protestations, and they were forced to enforce his order because he outranked them,” the lawsuit states. While Agostino was reassigned to another shift, he consistently worked overtime that overlapped with Zweibelson’s shifts, meaning the sergeant could not attend those roll calls.

The lawsuit claims Agostino is treated differently as a “personal favorite” of the police administration.

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It alleges that a warrant for his arrest was presented to the Hartford State's Attorney's Office in April 2015 on a charge of physically tampering with evidence, but that the city or police officials "took steps to protect Officer Agostino from a just prosecution during the investigation."

The complaint continues that Agostino has not received criticism well, becoming "angry and argumentative" when another sergeant tried to talk to him about his potential violations of direct orders or the code of conduct.

Zweibelson claims he is also owed a 2.5% pay increase for college credits he earned at Eastern Gateway Community College.

This raise was reportedly denied by Rendock. ■