

Garland drug officer's cases re-examined after credibility questioned

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An undercover informant opened the motel room door, letting four police officers rush in for the drug bust. They quickly arrested a man who had already spent 10 years in prison for dealing dope and burglary.

It was just one of many scores for star Garland narcotics detective Dennis Morrow. But what followed the July raid was unusual: Two of the officers told their boss that Morrow's written report about the raid misrepresented what happened - and last week, in court testimony, they swore that the inaccuracies were part of a pattern.

Now Dallas County prosecutors say they'll scrub all of Morrow's drug cases, just as they did after the 2001 scandal in which paid Dallas police informants planted fake narcotics on innocent people. Morrow has been a key witness in hundreds of felony drug cases.

"It is extremely rare for police officers to admit they have concerns about a fellow officer, so when these two Garland officers said they had credibility issues with Officer Morrow, quite naturally it gave the district attorney's office reason to be concerned as well," said Jammie Bradfield, spokeswoman for the Dallas County District Attorney's Office.

"We will review all of the cases filed with our office during the time Officer Morrow was assigned to narcotics where he was the arresting officer and take the appropriate action if necessary," she said.

Morrow could not be reached for comment. In court testimony Friday and during a Garland internal affairs investigation, he denied fabricating evidence.

"I put what I put in the report because that is what happened and that is what I saw when I first entered the room," Morrow wrote to investigators.

The Garland internal affairs investigation cleared Morrow last fall, although Garland police also chose not to ask the district attorney's office to press charges against Tramane Hooks, now 29, who was arrested on a drug delivery charge. He was freed.

Police commanders also transferred Morrow and almost everyone else in the narcotics unit, including the whistleblowers. Garland police declined to comment.

Conflicting reports

Friday's testimony came during a pre-trial hearing where defense attorney Bill Wirsky was seeking to get drug charges against a client dismissed in another case where Morrow made the arrest. That unrelated case is not resolved and the hearing continues Thursday.

The raid in which Hooks was arrested occurred on July 30 at the Deluxe Inn on Leon Road after two women acting as undercover informants told Morrow that a man was dealing drugs from a room one of them rented.

After one of the women opened the door to let officers inside, Hooks, who was sitting on the bed, "dropped to a laying position pretending to be asleep," Morrow wrote in his statement to internal affairs investigators. As Morrow approached, Hooks "moved to his stomach and made an attempt to go towards the ice box."

Morrow also wrote in a similar account in his original police report that Hooks lunged for the refrigerator where the stash was stored. This would have been crucial to proving the drugs were his because the room was in an informant's name.

But two officers, Daniel Colasanto and Cliff Wise, say they saw no lunge. According to police documents, after seeing Morrow's report, Colasanto told a supervisor about it and the supervisor informed his superiors.

Garland Police Chief Mitch Bates instructed Lt. Gary Gregory, an internal affairs commander, to talk to members of the narcotics unit who had been on the raid. Gregory had previously supervised Morrow for several years, writing glowing evaluations of his work.

According to Gregory's subsequent report of those conversations, both Wise and Colasanto told Gregory that Hooks was in bed under the covers when the raid started, and they did not see him reach for the drugs. The fourth officer, MarcMendoza, didn't recall seeing a lunge for the drugs but told Gregory he had no idea what Morrow might have seen.

After this was relayed to Bates, he instructed Gregory to open a formal internal affairs investigation and ordered Morrow placed on administrative leave.

In Gregory's September final report, obtained by The Dallas Morning News, he discounted Colasanto's story, saying after the investigation was opened, Colasanto tried to downplay his own assumption "that Officer Morrow was trying to add something to the report to bolster the affirmative link to the drugs."

Gregory wrote in his report that the whole investigation was a result of a lunch conversation a supervisor was present for during which "Officer Colasanto went into a tirade" and "made statements about Officer Morrow lying on a report."

Gregory's internal affairs report draws no conclusion about Wise's account. His report did conclude that the facts supported Morrow, and framed the situation as a personality conflict between Morrow and Colasanto, who he described as a frequent complainer.

Bates wrote a memo clearing Morrow. About the same time, the Garland Police Department shook up the narcotics unit, transferring the unit's commander and six detectives, including Morrow and the two whistleblowers, Colasanto and Wise.

Credibility challenged

But at Friday's hearing in another case where Morrow made the arrest - that of convicted felon Patrick Woodard, who faces drug charges - defense attorney Bill Wirskye called Colasanto and Wise to the stand for their sworn testimony on the Hooks arrest.

"The facts as they were portrayed didn't accurately reflect the events," Colasanto, an 18-year veteran of the department, told the court when asked about Morrow's police report. "I was concerned that if it went to court, that it would cause my fellow officers embarrassment, my unit embarrassment and my department embarrassment."

Wise, a 21-year-veteran of the department, testified that he would have seen Hooks lunge for the drugs had he done so. He testified that he recalled between five and 10 of Morrow's prior police reports had accuracy issues, and when asked if this caused him to have questions about Morrow's credibility, he answered, "Yes, sir."

There's no timetable for when the district attorney's review of Morrow's cases could be finished. Since 2005, at least 287 felony drug cases where Morrow made an arrest have passed through the court system. More than 80 of his cases are pending.

In the meantime, if defense attorneys keep calling Colasanto and Wise to the stand to cast doubt on his work, dozens of those could be dismissed, or juries could choose not to convict.

"It's disturbing that Officer Morrow lied, but it's even more disturbing that there's every indication that it was covered up by his chain of command in a whitewashed internal affairs investigation," Wirsky said. AT A GLANCE: GARLAND DETECTIVE DENNIS MORROW

Praised for drug work: In 18 years on the force, Morrow had established himself as a key figure in Garland's fight against drugs, first as a canine officer and then as a narcotics detective. Commanders praised him for requiring little supervision and having a "special knack for narcotics work." Using the analogy of a football team, former narcotics unit commander Lt. John Orozco, described Morrow as the unit's "quarterback" in an evaluation early last year.

Pressure to perform: The push was on last year at the Garland Police Department to meet a goal memorialized in a rhyme coined by police brass: "The Big Dream" of "129 in 2009," where 129 warrants served by the narcotics unit would be a record. The feeling among some unit members was that Morrow had carte blanche, even if it meant going over the head of his lieutenant to higher-ranking commanders, internal records show.

What co-workers say: Two officers have questioned Morrow's credibility while under oath in a courtroom. "He's a loose cannon," said T.J. Pilling, a retired longtime Garland narcotics detective. He was among several members of the narcotics unit who complained when the department assigned Morrow to the unit in 2006. "Dennis was a guy who had a long history of stuff that made you turn your head and go, 'Statistically, this just doesn't add up,' " he said.

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