

PIMA COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

MEDIA RELEASE

Chris Nanos, Sheriff

PCSD IA Investigation

October 15, 2024

On Saturday, October 12, 2024, members of the Pima County Sheriff's Department received multiple reports of deputies standing at the intersection of Tanque Verde and Sabino Canyon, displaying a sign that read, "Deputies don't want Nanos." Several citizens described this display as intimidating. Many expressed that it was disrespectful for on-duty deputies to engage in political activities. Several employees also voiced their disapproval by asking why departmental rules apply to some and not to others. It was determined that one of the people involved is a department member identified as Sgt. Aaron Cross.

Although Sergeant Cross was off duty, he was dressed in department issued attire, including green BDU cargo pants, a tan polo shirt, tan boots, and he was equipped with a weapon in a holster, a magazine pouch, and handcuffs, clearly recognizable as law enforcement.

Sergeant Cross was contacted by superiors in his chain of command to remind him that he was not authorized to engage in political activities while dressed in a manner that suggested he was acting as a police officer. Sgt. Cross was warned that any future political involvement should not include portraying himself as law enforcement. It was made clear to Sgt. Cross to not look like a deputy and Cross said that he understood.

On Monday, October 14, 2024, Sergeant Cross was observed at the northwest corner of Ina Road and Thornydale Road participating in political activities while wearing tan BDU cargo pants, tan boots, a gray t-shirt, a weapon in a holster, and his magazine pouch with handcuffs. As he was seen on Saturday, Sgt. Cross again held a sign reading "Deputies don't want Nanos." This behavior constituted a direct violation of his commander's orders, by appearing equipped like a law enforcement officer who is associated with official duties.

This activity raised a number of concerns regarding specific regulations in the Sheriff's Department, Pima County, and both state and federal law that prohibit political campaigning while representing yourself as a department member under the color of authority. We recognized that Cross's activity represented several potential violations, all of which would be very serious. As a result of these concerns, Sergeant Cross has been placed on paid administrative leave for the time required to fully investigate these matters.

For further information contact the Public Information Office at (520) 237-3740 or pcsdpio@sheriff.pima.gov.

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It is known that Sergeant Cross is collaborating with Lieutenant Heather Lappin on her campaign. Lt. Lappin's chain-of-command questioned her about her knowledge of Cross's activities. She admitted that she was aware of signs being made and that Sgt. Cross would be positioned near Udall Park and later on Thornydale Road but was not aware of when this was supposed to happen. Lt. Lappin expressed the belief that these activities were protected under first amendment rights and there is no violations of department rules and regulations nor merit system rules. Case law is clear, the Hatch Act restrictions do not violate the 1st, 5th, 9th, or 10th amendment and both county and department rules are also clear in defining these acts as prohibited.

Subsequent inquiry revealed that Lt. Lappin had been working with a local reporter. Information available shows that Lt. Lappin colluded with a journalist to facilitate payment to an inmate in exchange for a news story. Lt. Lappin granted the journalist access to inmates for interviews and provided him with access to deposit funds into the inmates' accounts. These actions raise several policy and ethical concerns regarding appropriate conduct of jail business by command staff.

The appropriate utilization of administrative leave affords the department the ability to halt any further activities so that a proper inquiry can be completed. Any time there is a possibility of violations of this type, all of which would be considered very serious infractions, we have a responsibility to investigate. When it comes to the integrity of our jail procedures, even the appearance of impropriety must be treated as a critical issue. We have an obligation to the public that supersedes all campaign initiatives and that is to ensure fairness and political neutrality. This situation raises enough concern that administrative leave and further inquiry is merited. In this case, due to the nature of the possible violations, referrals will be made to the Arizona Attorney General and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Some of those violations include provisions of Arizona statute A.R.S. 11-410, federal law 5 U.S.C. 7321-7326 (The "Hatch Act"), and numerous other Pima County, Law Enforcement Merit System Rules and PCSD policies.

At this stage it is in the public's best interest to understand the context of these decisions and the fact that a thorough investigation will take time. Beyond making these referrals, we will await the completion of those investigations before administrative processes continue and will make no additional comments at this time.

Holding staff accountable for their actions is not retaliation, and while I have previously overlooked certain behaviors due to the ongoing campaign, this new information is serious and simply cannot be ignored.

The investigation is ongoing.



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