

Gallup Police Chief Hart's position up in air

Written by Babette Herrmann and Staff
Friday, 22 June 2018 03:46



City officials tight-lipped on his status

Questions remained unanswered as this issue was going to press about the status of Phillip Hart as police chief for the city of Gallup.

The one thing that is known for sure is that Hart was not at his job this week as reports began circulating that he had been suspended or possibly fired. Neither Police Capt. Marinda Spencer nor city officials were answering questions about his status or if he would be returning as police chief after his suspension.

City officials have been very reluctant to comment on the Hart situation.

City attorney Curtis Hayes declined to comment, referring callers to Mary Ann Ustick, the city manager, who has also declined to give out any details.

This isn't the first time that city officials have taken disciplinary action against Hart during the three years he has served as police chief.

In 2017, he was placed on administrative leave for an unspecified time after he told city officials

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that they were violating state law by having uncertified community service aides log in intoxicated people into the Gallup Detox Center.

City officials have never addressed why Hart was placed on administrative leave which has caused more tension between him and City Hall.

Several months later, he filed a lawsuit against the city claiming that placing him on administrative leave was a violation of the federal whistleblowers law which protects individuals who report a wrongdoing.

The suit claimed that putting him on leave, the city prevented him from carrying out his duties as police chief. He has asked for damages. A trial on the matter is set to begin on April 2 in district court.

Hart came back from the administrative leave but the dispute continued to go on for several months as it ended in a court decision supporting the city's position, although Hart also took steps to make sure that there was a certified police officer available to formally log in people to the detox center to comply with state law.

A former DEA agent, Hart's term as police chief has not been met with universal support among the police department personnel, some of whom expressed privately their concerns about his rigid views on the running of the department.

He has also had problems in dealing with the press since coming on board with reporters saying it is a lot harder now getting incident reports than it was before Hart took over as police chief.

When he was hired, one of the key factors in his favor was his background in drug enforcement. As Gallup has had a long-standing problem with drug dealers, city officials were reportedly hoping that he would be able to reduce the problem here.

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And although drug arrests have increased since he came here, the problem hasn't gotten any better as most of those who have been arrested without any significant jail time, have gone back to dealing drugs.

One of the positive things he has done has been the creation of a rapid response team that has been called upon to help in situations where violence may occur. The team has been called out numerous times during the last year.

Over the past several months, Hart has reportedly been looking for jobs elsewhere and had applied to be police chief in Albuquerque, among other places.

As to who is in charge of the police department while Hart is gone, no one is saying. In the past when that has occurred, the authority has passed down to Franklin Boyd, the department's deputy chief.

Babette Herrmann
and Staff