

Guest Commentary of Sheriff Don Hunter

Re: Member Misconduct

For many months I have provided the Naples Daily News with incidents of member misconduct.

We are all aware that America's core values and principals are being constantly assailed. There are repeated reports of trust relationships violated. Corporate executives, physicians, attorneys, university professors, clergy and journalists have been implicated in these violations. There are no absolute safe harbors for integrity. The Collier County Sheriff's Office, while justifiably held to a higher (law enforcement/trust) standard, and in most cases exceeding that standard, is no different than other human institutions. We recruit from the demographics of the United States of America. Even our federal law enforcement colleagues in the Federal Bureau of Investigation report 778 similar complaints for the year March, 2003 through March, 2004; the Drug Enforcement Administration, 522; the United States Marshal's Service 172 for a 6 month's report. Each of these agencies is equally or more intense than us in screening applicants to their services and similarly aggressive in seeking out violations.

Human misconduct occurs in all organizations. Law enforcement organizations have a duty to prevent and correct this conduct in their groups.

Preventing misconduct begins with our hiring process. Our process is thorough and intense involving an extensive background investigation, criminal history check, polygraph examination, psychological evaluation, drug screen and a physical exam. In addition, we conduct proactive integrity checks (testing member integrity through improvised situations without the member's knowledge), formal unit staff inspections and direct training from me to ensure our members are well informed and in compliance with Agency policies and procedures. Our Agency is the recipient of multiple Accreditation certificates demonstrating that our practices and policies are equal to or exceed the best practices of our profession. All members are required to report violations of policy or law to me – either directly or through their supervisors. We accept complaints from anyone including anonymous complaints and regardless of the seriousness of the allegation.

Under Florida law, most records of the Agency, except active intelligence or investigative information, are open to the media and to the public, as they should be. This includes our internal affairs files. It is due to our openness that the public is made aware of disciplinary actions taken within the Collier County Sheriff's Office. Every month, the Naples Daily News requests a listing of all internal affairs files closed within the previous month. Those files with findings against deputies are then usually published in a newspaper article. Frivolous, false and unsustainable complaints against deputies which outnumber the negative files, have not been the usual subject of publication. Regrettably,

the Collier County Sheriff's Office is the only governmental agency or private organization in Collier County that receives such a request on a monthly or more frequent basis. The Board of County Commissioners, The Collier County Public Schools, Naples Police and Emergency Services Department, Marco Island Police Department, the State's Attorney and Public Defender's Offices, the many Fire Departments, Florida Highway Patrol, the City Councils – not one other agency has such a request. Thus, under this circumstance the public may be led to believe that only the Sheriff's Office has conduct issues.

The published misbehavior of a few individuals of our 1100 member group translates into a flawed public image of us. It is my hope that the public will see beyond these exceptional cases with the understanding that it is and will continue to be a priority of this Agency to prevent improper conduct and in the alternative to aggressively detect and ferret out those who betray my and the public's trust. I will not shy from my duty to prevent and correct misconduct even though there will be public discourse of my success. My duty is to preserve public confidence in all that we do.

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