

Deputy rose despite little experience

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When Dallas County commissioners appointed Jaime Cortes as Precinct 5 constable in 2007, one of his first hires was Howard Watson, a self-described former private investigator.

Watson, however, had only worked for several months as a police officer at two small police departments in North Texas and didn't qualify to be a deputy constable.

Candidates need at least one year of experience as a law enforcement officer to become deputy constables, county officials say. But Watson, 66, who has told others that his wife is the cousin of Cortes' chief deputy, Ken Hines, was hired anyway and immediately made a sergeant. Last year, Cortes promoted Watson to lieutenant, even though he's still paid at a deputy's salary level.

Watson now sits in a Dallas County jail cell, accused of abusing his constable badge and charged with nine felonies as part of a larger corruption investigation. Given his skimpy résumé and some disturbing questions about the life he led in California, some wonder how Watson ever became a high-ranking police officer.

An investigation by The Dallas Morning News found that Watson had been sought in California in connection with a large legal judgment and child support. He also had faced criminal charges in California that later were dismissed.

It's unclear how much Cortes and his staff knew about Watson's background. His office was in charge of the required pre-employment background investigation. Cortes did not respond to requests to discuss the decision to hire Watson.

The News asked to see Watson's personnel information, but the district attorney blocked its release, claiming it is part of an ongoing criminal investigation. In addition,

the county's human resources director said the DA's lawyers told her she couldn't discuss any aspect of Watson's hiring or employment.

County Judge Jim Foster, who helped initiate the current Dallas County constable investigation, said he wants to know why Cortes chose to hire and promote Watson.

"I have some serious concerns. How did he pass the smell test on the background check?" Foster asked. "What it tells me is this is nothing but a political agenda. And nothing seems to be based on sound business practices."

Watson is accused of, among other things, coercing two women into performing sexual acts instead of arresting them on outstanding warrants. He has declined interviews.

New career

Watson completed his basic peace officer training in 2004 at Eastfield College, a local community college, when he was more than 60 years old. Neal Wilson, program director for Eastfield's Criminal Justice Training Center, said that typically, someone who had previous police experience would not be enrolling in the basic peace officer course.

Wilson said his program does have some retirees, such as physicians and school superintendents, who become reserve officers to "get out and help the community." What's unusual in Watson's case, he said, is that Watson went on to a full-time position and then quickly moved up the ranks. "It's real surprising to me that he's a lieutenant," Wilson said.

Eastfield students must pass a criminal background check, a drug test, a psychological exam and a physical before they can enter the program, Wilson said.

Laura Le Blanc, a spokeswoman for the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education, which licenses officers, said there's no indication on Watson's records that he had out-of-state experience as a police officer.

She said her agency checks state and national criminal databases when conducting a background check on potential students for college programs such as Eastfield's. An

arrest or charge is not enough to disqualify a student. "They have to have a judgment of guilt," Le Blanc said, whether it's a deferred sentence or a conviction.

Police departments may have their own standards that exceed the minimums required by the commission. For example, an arrest for a violent offense may be a red flag for many police departments - especially if the incident involved allegations of domestic abuse.

"If it's for family violence, we would look at that very carefully. It may be a disqualifier even if they're not convicted," said Capt. David Mitchell, who is in charge of the Dallas County Sheriff's Department personnel department.

Watson faced criminal charges in California, including domestic abuse charges, but records did not show any convictions - in one case, authorities apparently couldn't find him.

Matt Simpson, a policy strategist for the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, said there should be some consistency with how background checks are done for police officer candidates statewide. He said that if red flags are missed in the first hiring at a small department, it's possible they won't be picked up on later.

Simpson offered another theory about why Watson didn't raise any concerns.

"This could have been an individual who was extremely good at covering his tracks," he said.

Watson's first law enforcement job was as an officer for Life School for less than three months in 2006, leaving after the school abolished its police unit. Life School is described as a charter school with campuses in Dallas, Red Oak, Lancaster, McKinney and Waxahachie.

In his Life School job application, Watson said he worked for a Dallas security company, Dallas Finest Security, for more than five years in patrol and investigation. State officials say they could find no record indicating that Watson is licensed in Texas as a security guard.

Watson also is listed on state records as having worked for about six months as a regular peace officer with the Maypearl Police Department. However, Lester Taylor, Maypearl's police chief, suggests that may be overstating the case.

"He was just a reserve for us. He wasn't a paid employee," Taylor said. "That's about all I can tell about him because he didn't work enough for me to give him an evaluation."

Watson never rode in a patrol car by himself, and was always with a sergeant or a full-time officer, Taylor said.

"He had a full-time job doing something else," Taylor recalled. "He just wanted to keep his license active, so the chief prior to me put him on."

Watson resigned from the Maypearl department in February 2007, according to state records. Taylor recalls that Watson wrote a letter stating that his wife was ill and that he was going to spend time with her.

Conduct questions

Watson went to work for Cortes in July 2007 and quickly rose to the rank of lieutenant, leapfrogging dozens of other deputy constables who had more training and experience.

Cortes promoted Watson last year, even though his one budgeted lieutenant position was filled at the time, county officials said. Also, the promotion was made despite concerns that arose about Watson's conduct shortly after he started working for the county.

After less than two months on the job, Watson was evasive and misleading to sheriff's deputies who were investigating a crash he was involved in while driving his county car off-duty, reports show.

Watson was driving with his wife, Janette, on a Saturday night when he struck the back of a semi-trailer. Watson told officers he was chasing a Mazda after seeing the driver waving a gun inside the car, according to the accident report.

Sheriff's deputies arrived to work the Sept. 1, 2007, accident on Interstate 30, and had difficulty getting a straight answer from him, reports show.

"When asked directly by investigating deputies, Sgt. Watson's story changed repeatedly," a sheriff's accident investigator wrote in his report. "The physical evidence at the scene and statements by unit 2 driver and 911 callers does not support the statements given by Sgt. Watson and his wife."

Dallas County commissioners revoked Watson's take-home car privilege after the accident and demanded that he reimburse the county for repairs. County policy prohibits the personal use of county vehicles.

Watson also caught the attention of county officials about two years ago after local tax office employees raised concerns about his habit of repeatedly renewing temporary registration tags on various vehicles.

In August, The News reported that he and other deputies had been renewing the temporary permits every month, paying \$25 each time. It led county officials to wonder whether they had title to the vehicles and where the constables were getting the vehicles. The constables wouldn't say.

Watson sought the most paper tags by far, said Keith Bussey, a former county tax office manager. Bussey said Watson usually was not in uniform when he appeared at the office. He said Watson renewed paper tags on several vehicles for at least six months.

"He was the designated one who was getting the tags for everyone," Bussey said.