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By Jan Skutch and Eric Curl (/authors/jan-skutch-and-eric-curl)

Savannah Morning News

# Investigation blasts former Savannah-Chatham police chief Willie Lovett

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Former Savannah-Chatham Police Chief Willie Lovett's conduct "was inadequate and unprofessional" and ignored available evidence in the case of two officers under investigation in a 2010 drug trafficking scheme, an independent investigation has found.

The report by Alexandria, Va.-based Manuel, Daniels, Burke International also found that Lovett "withheld vital information from Internal Affairs ... and instructed Internal Affairs to prepare (an official document) with patently false and incorrect information."

**Click here to view the full report (<http://savannahnow.com/investigation-former-police-chief-willie-lovett>)**

While no evidence of improper influence with the department's Internal Affairs unit was found, the report said, "their handling of the entire case was negligent and unprofessional."

The report, obtained Thursday by the Savannah Morning News, found that Sgt. Malik Khaalis repeatedly lied to his supervisors at the Chatham-Savannah Counter Narcotics Team, had unauthorized contact with Star Cpl. Willett

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Williams in a probe involving Williams' brother and drug organization, and likely warned a drug suspect that his phone was being tapped.

Ordered by City Manager Stephanie Cutter in October, the report focused on alleged misconduct by department officials and officers stemming from activity that surfaced when Lovett abruptly retired Sept. 27 after 40 years in the face of a sexual harassment complaint filed by a department officer.

In announcing the probe, Cutter said Lovett was "linked in some way" with the investigation.

Both Khaalis and Williams remained on paid administrative leave Thursday.

Cutter said Thursday she would not comment at this time on the report, other than to say that "appropriate action" would be taken immediately. She said MDBI's findings have spurred the need for further investigation into the department and additional reports will be forthcoming.

"A small handful of individuals have eroded the public's trust in the police department, and that trust will not be restored until we fully investigate all claims against our law enforcement personnel and take appropriate action," Cutter said in a press statement. "I have said from the beginning that we leave no stone unturned in this process. I ask the public for their patience as we continue to follow this investigation where it leads."

Interim Police Chief Julie Tolbert on Thursday reassigned much of the longtime existing staff of Internal Affairs and appointed Maj. Dean Fagerstrom as the head of the department.

Departmental problems surfaced in September when documents disclosed that police officials were told as early as mid-2010 that Khaalis, a veteran drug agent, and Williams, a 27-year police veteran, were the subjects of a major federal/local narcotics corruption investigation and that shortly afterward federal and county prosecutors refused to use either officer as a witness.

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Neither Khaalis nor Williams were disciplined and each remained on active duty until Tolbert, who replaced Lovett on Sept. 27, placed both on administrative leave with pay on Oct. 3 pending the outcome of the review.

### Probe focuses on officer's ties

The independent report released Thursday found that the CNT investigation focused on Williams' brother, James Williams, who was then a correctional officer at Coastal State Correctional Institute in Garden City, and his drug organization.

James Williams claimed to have a police officer, his brother, "in his pocket," the report found.

During the CNT probe, Khaalis "had come under suspicion by CNT officers because of unusual behavior," the report found.

A review of Williams' phone records showed seven contacts between him and Khaalis during the CNT surveillance, the report said. Toll records also revealed a "subsequent series of calls from Willet Williams to his brother James precisely at the time that James was exhibiting alerted behavior. ... At this point the case was moved to the DEA office without the knowledge of Khaalis,"

"MDBI believes it likely that James (Williams) was given surveillance-related information by Willet during these contacts," the report said.

"MDBI has difficulty understanding how internal affairs could not have concluded that these contacts could not have been associated with compromise of the surveillance."

The report said Khaalis "lied to his supervisor, left his place of assignment without required permission, violated standard operating procedure by taking pro-active enforcement activity without required permission of his supervisor and/or the case agent and put a sensitive investigation at risk."



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He also “showed deception” during a June 9, 2010, FBI polygraph, the report said. “Khaalis never made it known that he had a relationship with Willet Williams,” the report said.

When federal officials did not file charges against Khaalis or Williams, the department’s Internal Affairs unit recommended the cases against each be closed “due to a failure to find any policy violations in the information furnished by the FBI and CNT.”

### Former chief promoted officer Khaalis

Lovett returned Khaalis to active duty in August 2010. During Khaalis’ administrative leave, Lovett allowed him to take the sergeant’s exam and later promoted him to that rank, the report said.

That action drew CNT Director Roy Harris’ “sharply worded memorandum and supplemental report dated Sept. 24 to the county manager, who, in turn, had it personally delivered to Chief Lovett by the Chatham County attorney,” the report said.

Regarding Lovett, the report said “it appears that Lovett chose to have little involvement in matters (concerning Khaalis and Williams) and determined by his own admission, that the allegations and evidence against (them) did not represent serious violations of SCMPD policy.”

Despite being briefed in his office by Harris, the U.S. attorney and the FBI regarding details of the probe, Lovett told MDBI investigators “he would have handled it differently” if he had seen the Harris memo, the report said.

Further, he did not share the Harris memo with internal affairs and could not provide an explanation for not doing so, the report said.

“During his MDBI interview, Lovett stated that he based his decision to exonerate Khaalis on a ‘one page report’ he had been given.”

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“Whether because of personal animosity with the CNT director (Harris), failure to understand the seriousness of the issues involved, reluctance to take decisive action or any number of other possible reasons, Chief Willie Lovett failed in this matter to provide the strong and moral leadership demanded by his rank and position,” the report concluded.

In November 2010, Lovett instructed Internal Affairs Capt. Hank Wiley to prepare (a formal document covering the final internal affairs report), the investigation summary found.

Wiley, a 37-year police veteran, retired effective Nov. 1. Tolbert had removed Wiley from his internal affairs post in October to a shift commander’s slot.

That document “was to state that evidence presented by CNT and the FBI proved no violations of policy and that the documents received had been reviewed by the city attorney’s office, who could find no evidence of illegal activity by Khaalis,” the report said.

Investigators found no evidence that then-city attorney James Blackburn nor his assistant conducted any review and said both “deny being consulted in this matter.”

### Officer denies illicit activity

Regarding Willet, the report said the officer denied using his official position to influence the outcome of the CNT/DEA investigation.

But the report also addressed Williams’ involvement as a landlord for Section 8 federally subsidized housing program with the Housing Authority of Savannah.

The investigation found that Williams “belligerently confronted” housing authority Executive Director Earline Wesley Davis over his improper receipt of some \$5,000 in federal rent subsidy money, he was not prosecuted either federally or locally for fraud.

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When Davis confronted then-police chief Michael Berkow and asked why Williams had not been fired, she was told he was only reprimanded for his treatment of her because he had repaid the money.

The report said the case officer, Detective Bobby Chandler, "was told by SCMPD Chief Berkow and his assistant, Willie Lovett, that the criminal case was to be closed because Williams had paid back the money."

Chandler was transferred to the patrol division about two weeks later, the report found.

"Willet had a reputation for intemperate behavior in his dealing with the public," the report concluded based on witness statements.

## Who won praise

The MDBI report did find some positives in its report.

- Savannah-Chatham police Sgt. Cleveland Lovett: The report found no evidence to indicate Lovett, who is Chief Willie Lovett's nephew, tried to influence events at the scene of his stepson's drug-related arrest or that he engaged in any form of retaliation against the arresting officer, Kendall Brown.

Information had been received that Cleveland Lovett initiated a campaign in which he opened numerous spurious internal affairs investigations that resulted in Brown resigning from the force.

Investigators found only one internal affairs probe of Brown after November 2005, a complaint for excessive force, that resulted in his leaving the force.

- Chatham-Savannah Counter Narcotics Team was staffed with "some extraordinarily talented and industrious officers," singling out agents Peter and Michael Delatorre and Eric Broome who it said were viewed as "strong investigators, and it is obvious that they were strong leaders."



All three were transferred in October 2010 from CNT to patrol division slots by Lovett in an “unusual special order.”

In late November of this year, an attorney for the Delatorre brothers, who both have left the police department, filed separate notices of intent to file suits with city of Savannah and Chatham County officials based on complaints they were retaliated against by Lovett and other ranking officers after they reported corruption and illegal activity within the department.

- After Khaalis and, “to a somewhat lesser degree,” Willet Williams became “prime leak suspects,” CNT and DEA agents “were forced to expend what should have been an unnecessary amount of effort on non-mission related activities.”

## What’s next

The MDBI report recommends:

- Interim Police Chief Julie Tolbert review contents of the report as well as the original internal affairs report, and determine if administrative action is warranted as it relates to departmental policies.
- Additional investigative efforts are directed to resolve related spin-off issues pertaining to misconduct.
- A full audit and evaluation of Internal Affairs in the Savannah-Chatham police department be conducted, utilizing an accredited police consultant to ascertain “best practices” and recommendations for restructuring this critical component of the department in order to restore both internal and public confidence.
- MDBI is continuing with its investigation into other matters within the Savannah-Chatham police department, and a separate report will follow when complete, City Manager Stephanie Cutter said Thursday.

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**[Click here to read the report on former police chief Willie Lovett](http://savannahnow.com/news/2013-12-12/investigation-blasts-former-savannah-chatham-police-chief-willie-lovett)**



concerning his conduct in the investigation of the 2010 drug trafficking scheme (<http://savannahnow.com/investigation-former-police-chief-willie-lovett>)



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