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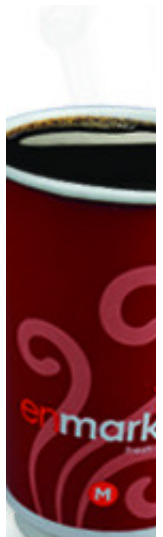
By Jan Skutch (/jan-skutch)

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Savannah-Chatham police officials ignored 2010 corruption probe

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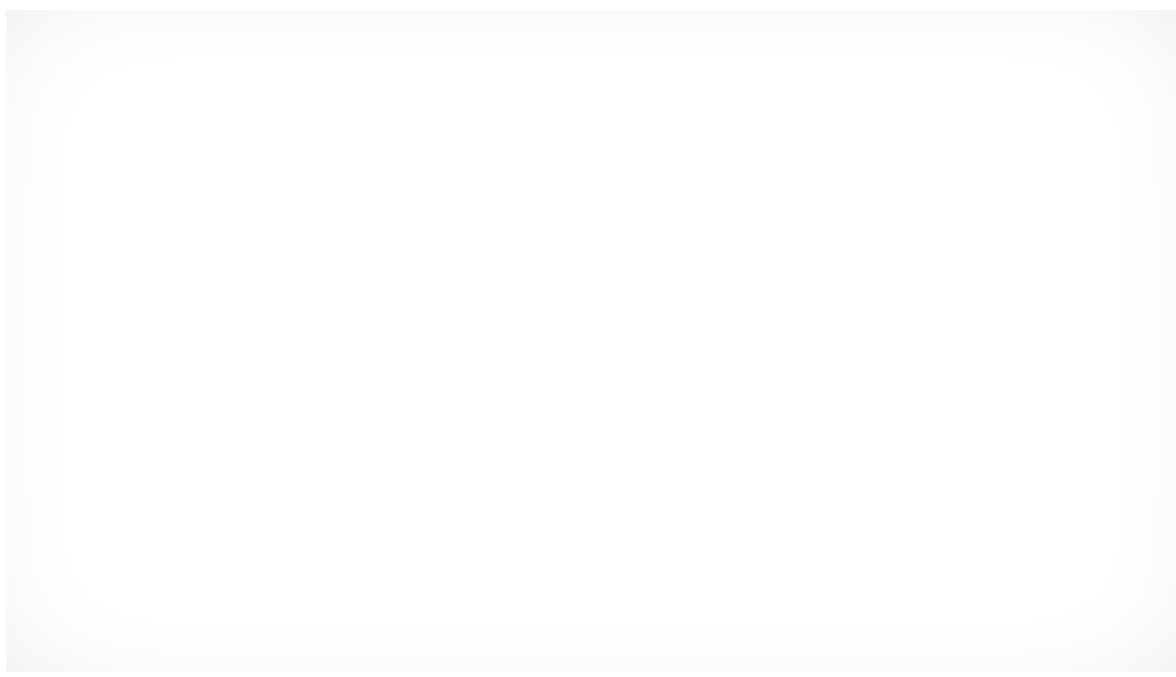
Savannah-Chatham police officials were told as early as mid-2010 that a veteran drug agent and a second officer were the subjects of a major federal narcotics corruption investigation and, shortly afterward, that federal and county prosecutors would refuse to use them as witnesses, according to documents obtained by the Savannah Morning News.



The basic case, initiated in 2008 and continuing into June 2010, involved what FBI agent Josh Hayes said were complaints that Chatham-Savannah Counter Narcotics Team agents were engaged in illegal drug activities.

The complaints under investigation also alleged Malik Khaalis, a CNT agent on loan from the Savannah-Chatham police department, was divulging information regarding that probe to Star Cpl. Willet Williams, who had a family member who was a target of the investigation. Williams was allegedly "participating in the illegal activities by providing police escorts for (a family member) when the illegal substances were being sold," Hayes told internal department investigators.

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CNT agents had observed "unusual behaviors and actions" by Khaalis that raised concerns about his "conduct as a police officer," the department investigation reported.

In a separate police internal affairs probe in 2004 under then-Chief Dan Flynn, Khaalis, also referred to as "Little Man," was repeatedly named as involved in a "police corruption" probe of two CNT agents who resigned.



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In the wake of the CNT investigation, Khaalis was “involuntarily transferred” back to Savannah-Chatham police on June 3, 2010, “as a major narcotics investigation was being concluded,” documents show.

Despite the CNT investigation and its findings, Khaalis was allowed to take the examination for police sergeant and was promoted in June 2012.

Documents dated Sept. 24, 2010, also stated that the U.S. Attorney’s office for the Southern District of Georgia advised Savannah-Chatham police that Khaalis, 39, “could not be used as a witness in any case in federal court.”

The Chatham County District Attorney’s office, then headed by Larry Chisolm, also was advised of the federal position and that CNT prosecutors would not use Khaalis’ “for testimony,” the memo said.

The reason cited: a “court decision regarding truthfulness” of witnesses in court.

Under existing law, prosecutors are required to disclose information of potentially tainted testimony by a witness to a defendant and his or her attorney. Such notification would place the credibility of the officer in question and could put prosecutors in a position of having to defend potentially tainted testimony.

Internal affairs nixed cases

Following the investigation by FBI and CNT agents, internal affairs officers with Savannah-Chatham conducted a separate probe.

“The Internal Affairs Investigation conducted into allegations made by CNT and the FBI failed to prove any (departmental) police violations,” Capt. H. Wiley III, internal affairs commander, reported Nov. 16, 2010.

The city attorney’s office “concluded that there was no evidence of illegal activity by agent Khaalis” and recommended the cases against Khaalis and Williams be “closed not sustained.”

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Neither officer was charged as a result of either investigation and both remain on active duty. Khaalis is assigned to the Islands Precinct; Williams, 48, is a crime prevention officer with the Central Precinct.

Questions remain

Left unanswered in the stacks of documents from the investigation is whether allegations against Khaalis under two police chiefs should have raised a red flag with police officials ahead of his being promoted.

A second unanswered question is how two officers who prosecutors say they will not use in court can remain on the job.

Prior to an announcement of his retirement Friday afternoon, recent Savannah-Chatham Police Chief Willie Lovett repeatedly declined, through his spokespeople, to comment on the case. In a letter dated Friday and addressed to City Manager Stephanie Cutter and County Manager Russ Abolt, Lovett said he intended to retire within 60 days but, instead, decided to do so immediately.

Savannah Mayor Edna Jackson said Friday that when the 2010 investigation came to her attention she and City Manager Stephanie Cutter “put it in the hands of the city attorney,” for review.

“I’m very satisfied with the way it is being handled now,” Jackson said, adding she wants all of the information, including input from the U.S. attorney, the district attorney and police chief so Cutter can report back to her and council.

The matter remains “active,” she said.

Official comment from city staffers has been limited to the initial response from City Attorney Brooks Stillwell: “The city attorney has been made aware of the issue and is researching it. Given that, and the fact that this is a personnel issue, we will not be able to discuss the issue until he has had a chance to complete his inquiry.”



Khaalis, through his attorney Nathanael Wright, declined to comment for this story.

District Attorney Meg Heap also declined to comment for this story, as did Chief Assistant U.S. Attorney Jim Durham.

Issues surfaced

Questions about Khaalis and Williams resurfaced this month with the revelation of a May 7, 2013, letter from Heap to Lovett in which she advised him that U.S. Attorney Edward Tarver said "his office will not prosecute (in federal court) any cases where officers Malik Khaalis or Willet Williams are involved."

The letter, which put in writing Heap's earlier conversation with Lovett, went on to advise Lovett that "after discussions with the (state's) Prosecuting Attorneys Council, I am in agreement with the U.S. Attorney.

"My office will not prosecute any cases where the above-named officers have any substantive involvement."

She also cited the credibility issue and requirement that she inform defendants and their attorneys of the material.

Disciplinary action withheld

Ultimately, the FBI and CNT investigations produced no action against Khaalis or Williams except for Khaalis briefly being placed on administrative leave with pay and returned to a patrol position with the Savannah-Chatham police department.

"No disciplinary action" was taken against Khaalis, a Dec. 17, 2010, letter authored by Roy J. Harris III, then-director at CNT and Khaalis' supervisor, said.

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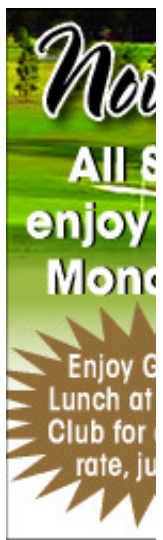
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Harris is a retired deputy director at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation who retired from CNT in December 2010. Now, he is Chatham County Sheriff Al St Lawrence’s chief deputy.

The letter stated that FBI, CNT, Drug Enforcement Administration agents and First Assistant U.S. Attorney Jim Durham were familiar with the investigation. Savannah-Chatham police Office of Professional Standards investigator Capt. Dean Fagerstrom was present for the interviews before Khaalis’ transfer back to metro.

Harris’ Dec. 17 letter was part of a required notification to Ken Vance, executive director of the Georgia Peace Officers Standards and Training Council. It informed him that Khaalis was under investigation by CNT’s Major Case Team, the FBI and DEA Savannah offices during a wire tap investigation being conducted by CNT and the DEA.

Megan Fail, Vance’s assistant, said POST records show no investigation or file on Khaalis was opened by the state agency.

A Sept. 24, 2010, memorandum from Harris to County Manager Russ Abolt stated Khaalis was assigned to CNT for six years, during the last four as a member of the major case unit.

During a major narcotics investigation, Khaalis was interviewed by FBI agents as part of a “corruption investigation,” the memo said.

During an FBI criminal polygraph test, Khaalis “showed deceptive on two critical questions, these pertaining to compromising an investigation by providing information to (a family member) under investigation and active surveillance, and the secondly (sic) where he had violated his oath of office,” the memo stated.

“Agents have no idea how many CNT investigations if any were compromised during the time Khaalis was assigned to the unit,” a CNT report showed.

The same memo to Abolt also outlined:

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- Repeated violations of department policy by Khaalis, including leaving his assigned duty station without permission, stopping a suspected vehicle without the knowledge or approval of his supervisor, and responding untruthfully when questioned.
- By carrying out these actions, Khaalis endangered the investigation for “reasons that remain unknown,” CNT investigators reported.
- While Khaalis was detailed to sit in the wire room to monitor calls, he told his supervisor he was going home for lunch.

Instead, he drove to an area near the Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport after he had been “fed false information about a money courier going to that area to pick up money to take to Atlanta.” He was tracked with a device installed on his CNT vehicle, the memo said.

- “These statements to supervisors about ‘going home for lunch’ were untruthful conduct during the course of an official investigation,” Harris said.
- Khaalis’s request for permission to call Willet Williams about a family member’s whereabouts was denied “as this was not proper investigative protocol.”
- “Later after checking toll records on Officer Willet, it was discovered that he and agent Khaalis had been in cellphone contact with each other numerous times during the course of the surveillance,” the memo said. “Later when questioned by the FBI, Khaalis could not, or would not, explain the calls.”

Williams, in a July 18, 2011, letter, sought a meeting with Chatham County officials, including Lovett, Harris and Savannah-Chatham police Maj. Julie Tolbert after telling them, “Recently I was falsely accused of being involved in illegal drug activity.”

“Whenever I question the Chatham County CNT regarding this slanderous claim lodges against me, I am told I am still being investigated. However, after speaking with Chief Lovett, I find that he was told there is no open case against me.”

He went on to say that whenever he asked Harris and current CNT director Everett Ragan for a report: "Each time I was told the investigation is still open."

2004 probe

In the 2004 case, police documents show Khaalis' name repeatedly appeared in connection with a "police corruption" investigation of CNT agents Cpl. Rafael Hall and Charles Boyd for conduct in a series of drug cases.

Hall was placed on administrative leave on June 25, 2004, pending the outcome of the investigation. He resigned Oct. 4, 2004.

Boyd resigned on Nov. 29, 2004, "prior to the conclusion of the inquiry."

During a Dec. 8, 2005, interview with internal affairs, Khaalis "stated of all the times he worked with Agent Hall he had never seen him do anything illegal whatsoever, and if Hall was doing illegal activities he never had any knowledge of it. He never saw it nor heard of it."

Khaalis also denied taking money or seizing money illegally. He stated he had read all the allegations concerning him and any claims about him being involved in a drug ring, taking money and selling drugs were untrue.

Khaalis told investigators he is an "honest professional police officer, and he has never been involved in illegal activities whatsoever."

THE OFFICERS

The officers under investigation:

- Malik Abdul Khaalis, 39, is a 1993 graduate of Beach High School who joined the Savannah Police Department in January 2000 after working for a year as a corrections officer at Coastal State Prison in Garden City. He has been described in departmental reviews as a “workhorse” who works well in any environment, and “energetic and tireless in his efforts.”
- Willet Jarette Williams, 48, is a Calhoun County native who joined the Savannah Police Department in January 1992. He previously worked for the Albany Police Department, the Moultrie/Colquitt Drug Squad and the South East Georgia Drug Task Force.

Savannah-Chatham Police Star Cpl. Willet Williams was named in a 2008 complaint by Housing Authority of Savannah Executive Director Earline Wesley Davis for fraud and “acting in an unprofessional manner toward her” following a confrontation at the Fahm Street post office.

Williams was accused of misappropriating \$4,649 from the housing authority in monthly payments he received for renting a Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) property to a woman who never lived there. He was a landlord for two Section 8 properties.

Housing Authority records show Williams provided a signed lease between himself and a client effective April 16, 2008, but the authority never received word the lease had not gone into effect.

As a result, Williams received an initial \$1,367 for three months as the first payment, then was paid \$547 a month for six months.

When Davis was alerted to the problem, she sent Williams a repayment notice on Dec. 11, 2008, him informing of a "grave and serious violation" of his contract and "demanding immediate repayment of ALL funds paid to you" by Dec. 19, 2008.

Williams subsequently presented and honored a repayment plan to housing officials by Jan. 20, 2009, to avoid possible federal prosecution, documents show.

Housing Authority attorney Dana Braun said in a Feb. 11, 2009, letter to Williams' attorney that "Williams was very difficult to deal with in arranging the repayments and to put it mildly, was not cooperative in that regard."

On Aug. 12, 2011, the police department notified Davis her complaint was "SUSTAINED" which means the investigation "supported the conclusion that the employee engaged in the alleged conduct and violated a rule by doing so."

Williams was disciplined, including a two-day suspension without pay from the police department for his behavior.

According to an Internal Affairs report, Davis told police that on Dec. 15, 2008, Williams accosted her at the Fahm Street post office and "verbally threatened her."

She immediately reported the incident to then-Police Chief Michael Berkow.

Davis told the Savannah Morning News Williams drove his police car at her outside the post office, then "put his hand on his gun."

Davis said she was "a little shaken" by the conduct she felt was meant to intimidate her.

Financial Crimes Detective B. Chandler, at Berkow's request to the FBI, met with two agents. They agreed to wait and see whether Williams honored his repayment schedule and Chandler met with First Assistant U.S. Attorney Jim Durham who advised federal prosecutors would not prosecute Williams if he repaid the money.

Williams told internal investigators the entire situation was "a simple mistake that he tried to correct" and said he had been unaware of the payments since they were direct deposits into an account his wife handled.

Housing Authority documents reveal that Williams was "terminated" and barred indefinitely from participating in the Housing Choice (Section 8) Program, the first and only such sanction since Davis took over in 2007.



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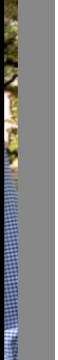
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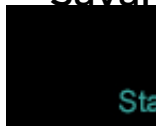
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