

Officer hired as North Port's 2nd in command comes with checkered past

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)

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The North Port Police Department is undergoing a restructuring in the hopes of improving a department that has been wracked by scandals in recent years.

But the officer recently hired to be second in command has had his own problems.

Less than a year ago, a doctor hired by the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office determined that Capt. Mike Pelfrey was unfit for duty as a captain, according to records obtained by the Herald-Tribune.



Capt. Mike Pelfrey of the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office will be North Port's new assistant police chief.

Police Chief Kevin Vespia said he was aware of the issues surrounding Pelfrey at the Sheriff's Office, but said Pelfrey's experience, leadership and skills made him the top candidate among more than 40 applicants. Pelfrey is set to join the North Port force on Oct. 22.

From mid-December to mid-April, Pelfrey, 58, was reassigned as a sheriff's deputy without supervisory duties. He underwent counseling sessions and monthly medical evaluations.

At the time of his evaluation, Pelfrey was the director of Suncoast Technical College's Sarasota Criminal Justice Academy. He was eventually reevaluated and reinstated as captain, assigned to a newly created position at the Sheriff's Office.

Before Pelfrey was found unfit for duty in December, sheriff's Col. Kurt Hoffman wrote in a memo that the captain was exhibiting mood swings, disobeying orders and experiencing a self-described anger issue.

Hoffman wrote that Pelfrey made remarks to students related to killing them. There were two allegations of Pelfrey inappropriately using knives in academic settings.

In an interview Thursday, Pelfrey said that his actions and words were misconstrued and taken out of context. He said that he has never been unfit to serve as a captain and is well-equipped to be North Port's assistant police chief in Sarasota County's largest city.

"Minimal communication really caused this misunderstanding," he said.

Vespia said Pelfrey has been "very transparent" about the past year and "there's absolutely no question" Pelfrey is qualified.

Before he was hired Pelfrey passed a psychological evaluation and polygraph test, which Vespia said is part of his department's standard hiring process.

"I am very comfortable with him leading this organization with me," Vespia said. "Mr. Pelfrey is an absolute professional and ethical, and I value that."

Hoffman said he believed Pelfrey's experience made him "perfect" to serve as assistant police chief. He said the fitness for duty evaluation was conducted for Pelfrey's welfare.

"Mike Pelfrey has been a valued employee of the agency for a long time," he said. "We just wanted to make sure whatever issues were going on were addressed."

Pelfrey's hiring comes during a time of major transition for the North Port Police Department.

["A Legacy of Leniency," a Herald-Tribune investigation published last year](#), found that 19 North Port officers had been investigated three or more times over a period of 18 years for offenses ranging from conduct unbecoming an officer to burglary. Later in 2014, a veteran North Port officer committed suicide as sheriff's deputies came to arrest him in a sexual battery case.

Meanwhile, a Florida Police Benevolent Association confidential survey last December found that 95 percent of police officers who responded considered morale low or very low in the department.

North Port brought in a consultant last year that resulted in 18 "major recommendations" for the department, including a restructuring of the management team, which is being implemented this fall.

Qualifications

The agency announced its hiring of Pelfrey on Oct. 2 at a salary of \$90,000. The assistant police chief position had been vacant since Anthony Sirianni retired on June 13.

Pelfrey has served with the Sheriff's Office since 1989, spokeswoman Wendy Rose said, and has held the rank of captain since 2006. Pelfrey, who lives in North Port, said he holds two master's degrees from the University of South Florida, in criminal justice administration and in adult education. He said his education, combined with his law enforcement and teaching experience, made him the right choice for the assistant police chief position.

"I have served over 26 years at the Sheriff's Office, 21 of them being in the supervisor capacity from corporal to sergeant to lieutenant to captain," he said. "At one point I was responsible for all of patrol operations which encompassed 197 personnel, prior to that I was responsible for all the school resource officers in Sarasota County."

Questions about his judgment surfaced in late 2014, Sheriff's Office records show.

An internal affairs investigation was launched after a heated Oct. 16 meeting between Pelfrey and his subordinate, academy training coordinator Keith Muncy. The two began arguing in Pelfrey's office and continued the confrontation in the academy lobby. Pelfrey said the argument culminated months of a deteriorating relationship between him and Muncy.

Muncy was found at fault, and in mid-November was given a reminder to be courteous and civil.

On Nov. 4, Pelfrey attempted to enter several unfavorable comments into Muncy's performance management records. Records show Col. Hoffman described the entries as incomplete and concerning.

Hoffman, Maj. Jon Goetluck and Pelfrey met Nov. 13 to discuss the performance management records and the argument between Pelfrey and Muncy that preceded them.

"(Capt. Pelfrey) was very emotional during our meeting and appeared visibly upset," Hoffman later wrote in a memo. "(Pelfrey) went from anger to crying and at several points in the conversation was so overcome with emotion that he could not speak."

During the meeting, Hoffman wrote, Pelfrey said he "internalized" workplace issues and had "anger issues."

But on Thursday, Pelfrey contested that those were Hoffman's words, not his.

"I attempted to explain myself, but that was to no avail," Pelfrey said. "He said 'I believe you internalize this and you have anger issues.'"

Hoffman maintained that his quotations were correct.

"I was very careful in documenting that conversation," he said Thursday. "Maj. Goetluck was also at that meeting. His recollection is the same as mine that those were comments made by Capt. Pelfrey."

In his memo, Hoffman noted that the argument between Pelfrey and Muncy shared similarities to a previous argument Pelfrey had with Lt. Jeff Slapp, now a captain. Hoffman wrote that Pelfrey had started a meeting between himself, Hoffman and Slapp by pointing at Slapp and calling him a liar.

"...(Pelfrey) creates more conflict than reasonably exists for the circumstances," Hoffman wrote. "The incident with Keith Muncy is now the second incident where (Pelfrey) has exhibited an unreasonable reaction to common workplace/employee issues."

Report: Students threatened

As the internal investigation into Muncy's behavior was underway, Pelfrey allegedly exhibited peculiar behavior at the Sarasota Criminal Justice Academy.

At an Oct. 24 class graduation ceremony, Hoffman wrote he observed Pelfrey threaten his students.

"Before anybody leaves this room you will fill out the (Florida Department of Law Enforcement) paperwork, or I will kill you," Pelfrey reportedly said.

When the class went outside for a photograph, Hoffman wrote, Pelfrey opened a pocket knife and made an apparent "shaving motion" at a student's face. But Hoffman noted that the student's appearance was fine.

Pelfrey said that student was a Sheriff's Office employee with whom he shared a years-long joke about keeping a clean appearance. Pelfrey said it was not the first time he had made such a shaving gesture.

As for the "kill" comment, Pelfrey said the comment was not malevolent but a joke to reiterate the importance of completing the paperwork.

"It was for their benefit," he said. "It was taken so out of context."

Hoffman said he believed that Pelfrey probably made the comment as a joke but that the statement was still inappropriate.

"I thought it was a little over the top," he said. "But I wasn't concerned that someone was going to harm someone."

Muncy would later report that Pelfrey acted similarly at the start of a law enforcement recruit class earlier in 2014. He allegedly pointed an unsheathed tactical knife at the class while addressing them.

"I don't want any drama, or I'll cut your (expletive) heads off," Pelfrey allegedly told the class.

Pelfrey claims that is a complete fabrication.

"That never happened," he said. "I wouldn't tolerate that from anyone."

In retrospect, Pelfrey said he believes that he and Muncy's sometimes contentious relationship sparked all of this.

"This was a one person on one person disagreement that got off track," he said.

Unfit for duty

Sheriff Tom Knight placed Pelfrey on paid administrative leave Nov. 21. He was temporarily stripped of his badge, gun and agency identification card.

Dr. John Super, a licensed psychologist, evaluated Pelfrey and found that he was unfit to serve as a captain at the time.

Super noted that Pelfrey may have been suffering from anxiety and depression.

"I was anxious and somewhat depressed the day that I saw him because the day before I was put on administrative leave for the first time in my life," Pelfrey said. "I thought I was going to lose my livelihood. I thought I was going to lose my profession."

From mid-December through mid-April, Pelfrey worked as a deputy in the civil division, on cases involving evictions, child support and injunctions for protection.

During that time he attended assigned counseling sessions, monthly medical evaluations and one-on-one training.

In April he was reinstated as a captain but no longer worked at the Sarasota Criminal Justice Academy. Instead he served in the Sheriff's Office's newly created staff inspections position, reporting directly to Col. Hoffman.

Pelfrey described the job as a research and development type position where he looked to improve the efficiency and policies of the Sheriff's Office. He's juggling about five projects now.

He doesn't supervise anyone directly in this position, but Pelfrey said Sheriff's Office employees are often temporarily assigned to work under his guidance.

"It's project program driven," he said.

Hoffman said he has been "completely satisfied" with Pelfrey's work.

"I think from time to time we all have stressors in our life," he said. "I've had no issues similar to this with Mike in the entire time he has been back in the position of captain, and we meet on a regular basis."

Pelfrey is scheduled to begin his assistant police chief job at the North Port Police Department later this month. His retirement notice to the Sheriff's Office was brief, only six sentences long.

"I request no retirement ceremony, nor a Sheriff's Office memo reporting my retirement. I'll say my goodbyes personally in the coming weeks," he wrote. "I thank you for allowing me to be a member and for so many great opportunities with the Sheriff's Office."

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