

Police fear federal case may be hurt by lawsuit

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Published July 23, 2004|Updated Aug. 28, 2005

Veteran Tampa detective Dale "Chip" DeBlock may have jeopardized a federal investigation by revealing sensitive details of the case in court papers, police said Thursday.

DeBlock was the lead detective in the search for Jason Galehouse, who along with another 26-year-old man, Michael Wachholtz, disappeared from Hillsborough County in Dec. 2003.

Galehouse is still missing. Wachholtz's body was found in January in the back of his Jeep near his Town 'N Country apartment, too badly decomposed to determine a cause of death.

DeBlock is pursuing a lawsuit against Hillsborough State Attorney Mark Ober, claiming Ober harmed his career by questioning his credibility in 2001 and declaring prosecutors would not use him as a witness.

In papers filed last month, DeBlock said Ober stymied his attempt to get a search warrant in a criminal case. DeBlock's suit says he obtained evidence in January 2004 that an unnamed suspect might be involved in the rape, kidnapping, torture and murder of homosexual men. DeBlock found evidence, the suit said, that the suspect may have drugged his victims.

Authorities are saying little about the case in question _ not even who it involves _ except that federal investigators are looking into it and have executed a search warrant.

But Tampa police say details included in DeBlock's lawsuit may hurt investigators' chances of solving the case.

"It is highly inappropriate for a police detective to interject unsubstantiated allegations from an ongoing investigation into his personal civil dispute," said Tampa police spokeswoman Laura McElroy. "The department is very upset with that, because it could jeopardize an investigation."

She said it had not yet been decided whether to launch an internal-affairs investigation into DeBlock's conduct.

"On face value, he violated policy, and obviously the police department has a problem with that," she said.

In May 2001, Ober announced he would no longer use DeBlock as a prosecution witness, saying he lacked credibility. DeBlock secretly had recorded conversations between prosecutors on the suspicion that an assistant city attorney prosecuting massage parlors actually was protecting potential targets.

Since then, the police department has been shuffling DeBlock from one job to another. He was transferred from the criminal investigations bureau to auto theft, then to the missing-persons unit, then to a desk job assessing tips on child-abuse cases, and finally, earlier this month, to a job running traces on stolen guns.

DeBlock was working in missing persons when he came across the case he cited in his lawsuit, Tampa police said.

"Most of the time, the people in the missing persons unit have almost no contact with the state attorney's office," McElroy said. "Most missing persons don't turn into criminal investigations. It seemed like we could use him as an investigator and it wouldn't be a conflict."

Ober's lawyer said his handling of the search warrant presented by DeBlock did not jeopardize the investigation, and that Ober asked Tampa police to get another officer's signature on the warrant.

Concerned that DeBlock may have divulged too much information about an ongoing case in his lawsuit, Ober has referred the matter to the U.S. Attorney's Office to investigate.

After saying DeBlock lacked credibility, it would be foolhardy for Ober to put the detective on the witness stand or allow him to play a key role in a criminal prosecution, said local defense attorney John Fitzgibbons.

If he were representing a defendant in a case involving DeBlock, Fitzgibbons said, he might attempt to call Ober to the stand as a "reverse character witness" to challenge the detective's credibility.

"There's so many ways this could come back to hurt the prosecutor, that if you had any sort of important case at all, why take any chance whatever?" Fitzgibbons

said. "If the defense had (even) a five percent chance of getting it admitted, why take the chance?"

DeBlock declined to comment for this story.

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