

Officer death review now criminal inquiry

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Cook

An Arkansas State Police review into the death of a Jonesboro officer who died after reporting to training at the state academy has been changed to a criminal investigation after police learned of facts “contrary” to original statements, a state police spokesman said Monday in an email.

The email from spokesman Bill Sadler was in response to Arkansas Democrat-Gazette inquiries about a text message Department of Public Safety Director Jami Cook sent shortly after officer Vincent Parks, 38, fell ill July 17 while taking part in a training academy at Camp Robinson. Cook also acts as secretary of the Arkansas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards, which oversees the training academy.

Cook says in the text that Parks “fell out” after jogging to and from his car and engaging in four minutes of calisthenics. The text message, obtained by the newspaper through a Freedom of Information Act request, was sent to Alison Williams, Gov. Asa Hutchinson’s chief of staff, and three other law enforcement officials.

On the evening of July 17, hours after the text message was sent, the Arkansas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards sent out a release stating that Parks did not participate in any physical training prior to showing signs of medical distress.

The release has been questioned by Rep. Frances Cavanaugh, R-Walnut Ridge, and Jonesboro Police Chief Rick Elliott, who have said they believe physical training occurred in high heat prior to Parks showing signs of distress.

On Monday, both reiterated their desire for answers regarding Parks’ death.

Sadler, acting as spokesman for the training commission, stuck by the original statements when questioned by the Arkansas-Democrat Gazette on July 22, the same day Cook announced her resignation, citing health concerns.

The Democrat-Gazette sent a series of Freedom of Information Act requests to state police, Cook’s offices and the governor’s office regarding Parks’ death and Cook’s resignation.

Hutchinson’s office denied the requests, saying the documents were “working documents” and legally protected from release.

Asked Monday for a statement regarding Cook's text message to Williams, the governor's office declined until an autopsy and a review of Parks' death could be completed.

Portions of the material in the requests made by the Democrat-Gazette to state police and Cook's office were released Friday, including Cook's text message.

On Sunday, the Democrat-Gazette was invited to a meeting with Cook scheduled for Monday, but an hour-and-a-half before the scheduled meeting the Democrat-Gazette was notified that Cook would not answer questions.

"Please contact me regarding the scheduled interview with Secretary Cook," Sadler said in the email Monday. "She will not be able to answer the questions you asked on Friday and will not be available to speak to you regarding the death of Vincent Parks." Sadler followed up later with a timeline of events, as he knew them, and information regarding the criminal investigation.

Sadler said Cook first contacted him about Parks' death at 3:24 p.m. July 17. The call came about an hour after Cook's text to the governor's chief of staff.

"Secretary Cook provided me with a cursory overview of circumstances leading up to the death of Officer Vincent Parks," Sadler said in his email.

"She stated Officer Parks had exhibited symptoms of being in medical distress shortly after his 1 p.m. arrival at ALETA Central. Additionally, she stated, Officer Parks was scheduled to participate in a physical training regimen beginning about 1:30 PM but was extracted from the class formation and taken to a shaded area where oxygen was administered to the officer." During follow-up questions Cook handed the phone to a training academy supervisor, Joe Dubois, Sadler said.

"Mr. Dubois recapped the overview provided by Secretary Cook and answered my questions with information needed to prepare a news release," Sadler said in the email.

"More than once, Mr. Dubois reiterated that Officer Parks had not participated in the physical training portion of the class." After notification of the family, Sadler said he provided a draft of the release to Cook. She called at about 6:55 p.m. and said she and Dubois were "satisfied with the accuracy of the release." The release was distributed at 7:15 p.m.

Cook asked for the review of the death July 18, Sadler said.

"... the review was re-categorized as a criminal investigation based on statements contrary to the initial facts provided to Secretary Cook and subsequently provided to me," Sadler wrote.

Sadler did not clarify what the inaccuracy was, where it came from, or questions regarding the text message in the email. He also noted that any other questions will be addressed once the investigation is formally closed.

“As a public information officer for the Arkansas State Police over the past 25 years, accuracy and truth has always been paramount in my assignments,” Sadler wrote. “Equally important in the role of speaking on behalf of the department is the respect and trust I have for the state troopers who are conducting this investigation. In fairness to all involved and simultaneously ensuring the integrity of the investigation, I must limit my comments only to the facts as I know them regarding the information that I released on the evening of July 17.” Questions about whether Parks was training or not first came to public light when Rep. Mark Berry, R-Ozark, questioned Cody Hiland, Arkansas Department of Public Safety legal council, during a legislative meeting last month.

“There is absolutely no excuse for a heat-related casualty in a training environment, especially when the Department of Health has excessive heat warnings all over the state for several weeks,” Berry said at that time.

Hiland declined to answer questions, saying it was unknown how Parks died at that time.

A text message of Cook’s, obtained as part of the Freedom of Information request, refers to Berry’s comments in the legislative committee.

“His implications are reckless and his motivations are disgusting,” Cook says in the text message. “I was with Vinny’s family Sunday, with our staff, with the other recruits. Not a dry eye for any of us. This is real to us. To him it’s only an opportunity. That in itself is yet another tragedy.” Cook couldn’t attend a request to testify before the legislative council regarding Parks’ death because of a graduation ceremony in Northwest Arkansas, documents show.

With Cook set to resign in early August, it is likely someone else from the department will testify about the events during the legislative council meeting Aug. 19.

Berry said Monday that he has plans to work with another legislator on drafting legislation that will create protocols for training in certain weather conditions.

He said there shouldn’t have been any training happening during the heat advisories in place July 17. At the very least, he said, they should have been out there earlier in the day.

Central Arkansas was under a heat advisory from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. that Sunday, according to Dylan Cooper, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service in North Little Rock. Heat advisories are put in place when heat indexes could reach 105 or greater for a region.

Cooper said previously that the closest sensor to Camp Robinson is located at Bill and Hillary Clinton National Airport/Adams Field. He said that sensor recorded temperatures at 97 degrees with a heat index of about 106 at 1 p.m. July 17. He said the temperature was 99 degrees at 2

p.m. with a heat index of 106.

Draft legislation could include the use of wet bulb globe temperature testing prior to officer training, something that is done in the military and often used by high school football teams, Berry said.

The measure looks at temperature, humidity, wind speed, sun angle and cloud cover to determine the stress someone might endure when engaging in physical activity.