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Pennsylvania police chief charged with helping distribute cocaine, methamphetamine

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A Pennsylvania police chief accused of helping to distribute cocaine, methamphetamine and other narcotics faces 20 years in prison, federal prosecutors announced Wednesday.

If convicted, Greensburg, Pennsylvania, police chief Shawn Denning, 41, also faces a \$1 million fine. Denning faces six total counts of drug distribution related charges and prosecutors said the crimes occurred during a 16-month period, from June 2021 to Oct. 2022.

Greensburg Mayor Robert Bell told USA TODAY Wednesday that Denning “was no longer with” the city in light of the charges. Greensburg is a town of about 15,000 residents in western Pennsylvania. Its police department has 27 officers.

Probable cause affidavit reveals details

Drug Enforcement Administration investigators said they used an informant to collect evidence against Denning. The informant had prior convictions and faced potential federal drug charges in an unrelated investigation and cooperated with the DEA in hopes of receiving a more lenient sentence, according to the affidavit.

The informant first met Denning in summer 2021, when Denning was still a Captain, according to the affidavit. Denning told the informant he knew dealers in California who could send him drugs.

Affidavit gives timeline of alleged crimes

- From June 2021 to Oct. 2022, Denning served as a middleman who facilitated the informants' purchase of large quantities of drugs by connecting him with multiple suppliers for whom he vouched.
- The informant told Denning he knew he was a police officer, but heard he could help him find drugs.
- Denning had the informant message him on Wickr because "It's how all the heavy hitters conduct business it's encrypted so virtually impossible to be intercepted ever," according to the affidavit.
- In Nov. 2021, Denning connected the informant with a cocaine dealer. The informant ultimately purchased a quarter ounce of cocaine for \$450, which he sent the dealer via Venmo.
- The informant asked Denning who would "take care" (pay) of him. Denning responded "I don't sell anything man I just know folks is all. Dude will handle it all he's trustworthy."
- The cocaine was sent to the informant via mail. When the package was delayed at one point, Denning checked on its status for the informant.
- The informant bought another ounce of cocaine from the same dealer in Feb. 2022.
- From May to July 2022, Denning connected the informant to suppliers for other drugs such as Adderall and ecstasy, and helped look into any delays or hang ups the informant ran into when purchasing from the dealers. At one point, Denning sent a photo of a menu of drugs a dealer he knew offered.
- When a \$500 shipment of Adderall never arrived from one of the dealers, Denning met with the informant in person at a cornhole tournament in October, and gave him a set of cornhole bags to make up for "bad business."

Conspiracy to distribute

Prosecutors charge Denning with five counts of "aiding and abetting" the distribution of narcotics, and a sixth count of "conspiracy to possess with the intention to distribute" narcotics. Although Denning never directly sold drugs to the informant, prosecutors said the totality of his actions amounted to conspiracy.

According to the affidavit, Denning:

- Connected the informant to suppliers.
- Sent menus and product prices to the informant.
- Said he had connected other people to suppliers.
- Checked the status of at least one of the deliveries for the informant.
- Checked on quality of product after it was received.
- Sent money to suppliers.
- Provided cornhole bags to the informant as compensation after a deal fell through.
- Was told multiple times by the informant that he intended to distribute the drugs he bought to other people.

Ex-chief was a Marine

Denning became chief in March, the Pittsburgh-Tribune Review reported. He had been with the department since 2008, and previously served four years as Marine before a stint with the New York Police Department, according to the Pittsburgh-Tribune Review.

A lawyer for Denning was not listed in a court database Wednesday. A message sent by USA TODAY to Denning's work email was not returned.

Denning was released on \$250,000 bail Tuesday, court documents show.

According to the Pittsburgh-Tribune Review, on the day the Denning took his oath as chief he said "I have the utmost respect for the title of chief of police...I have great expectations of myself."

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