



NEWS

Riverside appeals state board's decision to decertify police officer

Ruling surfaces after employee's name appears on 'Do Not Call' list



by **Bob Uphues**
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The village of Riverside is appealing a decision by the Illinois Law Enforcement Training Standards Board to decertify a 37-year-old woman who was hired as a patrol officer in February, a ruling the village made public after the officer's name was included on a "Do Not Call" list released July 17 by Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx.

The Do Not Call list, also known as the Brady List, includes the names of police officers (either active or inactive) who won't be called to provide testimony in criminal cases because past conduct of that officer might be used to challenge the credibility of a prosecution.

That list is separate from, but apparently is informed by, decisions made by the ILETSB, which is charged with maintaining professional standards of sworn police and corrections officers.

The ILETSB decertified Zenna Ramos as a police officer on April 19, about two months after the village hired her, apparently because of a 2008 misdemeanor arrest for theft.

The village immediately appealed the decision, but stripped Ramos of her police powers. She is still employed by the Riverside Police Department, performing administrative duties.

According to Village Manager Jessica Frances, who met with the Landmark along with Ramos, Public Safety Director Matthew Buckley and attorney Yvette Heintzelman on July 19, the village board authorized Ramos to continue working for the village pending the appeal.

Heintzelman said she was not aware of anyone appealing an ILETSB decision in the past and that in lieu of a formal administrative hearing process, the village will argue its case before that state board on Sept. 7.

“The village board, village of Riverside and I fully support Zenna Ramos,” said Riverside President Joseph Ballerine. “It is appalling that she is forced to revisit the challenges that she overcame so many years ago. ...

“The village is fortunate that Zenna applied to work in Riverside, and we want her to be here for many years, this is why the village will continue to advocate on her behalf. She is the type of employee that every department endeavors to hire. Her presence, knowledge, positive attitude, approach and life experiences only strengthens an already incredible department.”

Illinois state Rep. Abdelnasser Rashid, whose 21st District includes Riverside, also threw his support behind Ramos, asking the ILETSB to revisit its decision.

“I stand with Ms. Ramos and the village of Riverside in calling on the Illinois Law Enforcement Training Standards Board to reverse its decision to decertify,” Rashid said during an appearance at the village board’s July 20 meeting. “I hope the ILETSB promptly reviews its decision and that the state’s attorney office removes her from the ‘Do Not Call’ list.”

What makes this case unusual is that the ILETSB previously certified Ramos as a police officer in August 2021, a month after she was hired as a patrol officer in Cicero.

As part of the police officer application process, candidates are asked to disclose any prior arrests or convictions, which do not necessarily disqualify someone from becoming a police officer.

In both her applications to Cicero and Riverside, Ramos disclosed a 2008 arrest in North Riverside for misdemeanor retail theft, when she was 22 years old.

According to the police report, which the Landmark obtained from the North Riverside Police Department, Ramos was arrested for allegedly stealing three shirts, valued at a total of \$14.99, from J.C. Penney at the North Riverside Park Mall.

A June 23 letter from Patrick L. Hahn, general counsel/chief ethics officer of the ILETSB, to Heintzelman noted Ramos was convicted of retail theft in 2008 and placed on six months conditional discharge.

In the same letter, Hahn also argues that even though the conditional discharge was vacated, her conviction was still a matter of fact and that it didn’t change the ILETSB’s discretion to deny waiver requests.

Hahn stated Ramos was also placed on court supervision for retail theft in 2003, and that “Ramos’ prior retail thefts call her credibility and character into question, which can be exploited to a criminal defendant’s advantage.”

Arguing on Ramos’ behalf, Heintzelman replied on July 21 that ILETSB did not afford Ramos due process before reporting her decertified to the Cook County State’s Attorney.

By reporting her as a Brady List officer prior to Riverside’s appeal being adjudicated, Heintzelman continued, “ILETSB may have violated Ramos’ liberty interests in her job and reputation as well.”

Heintzelman also stated that at the time of her 2008 arrest, Ramos “was a single parent struggling with domestic violence-related issues” and that the theft was done “out of desperation.”

Following her arrest, Ramos told the Landmark, she sought to change her life’s trajectory and landed a job as a community service officer in Cicero, working in that position for four years before moving to the department’s front desk, a job she held for six years before she decided to apply to be a police officer in her 30s.

“I learned from my mistake and did everything I could to change my life,” Ramos told the Landmark. “When I learned I could apply to be a police officer even with the misdemeanor, I said, ‘OK I’m going to change my life around and do better for myself and my family.’”

The 2008 arrest was not an obstacle to Ramos being hired as a police officer in Cicero and the ILETSB also did not object to it back in 2021.

Ramos resigned from the Cicero Police Department in 2022 for personal reasons and worked the front desk at the Forest View Police Department while seeking to be hired as a police officer elsewhere.

After testing in Riverside, the Police and Fire Board placed her No. 2 on Riverside’s hiring eligibility list. The Riverside Board of Fire and Police Commissioners voted to approve Ramos’ hire on Feb. 20 and because she was already a certified police officer, she was immediately placed into the department’s field training program.

However, after leaving Cicero, Ramos status as a police officer became inactive and the ILETSB sought records from Riverside as part of their reactivation process. Part of that information included a letter from Buckley acknowledging Ramos’ prior arrest and waiving concerns.

“As a member of this community who leads public safety, I would never bring anyone in here that wasn’t a valuable employee,” Buckley said. “I believed that was what we had in Zenna.

“She took accountability for her actions, that’s what I saw.”

But a law that went into effect on Jan. 1, 2022 allowed the ILETSB to seek decertification “for misconduct that does not rise to the felony conviction level,” according to a memo on the ILETSB’s website.

While the ILETSB website lists theft as one the 41 misdemeanor offenses triggering automatic decertification if an officer is convicted of that crime or enters a guilty plea, it does not state simply being charged triggers decertification.

But, apparently, the 2008 misdemeanor arrest was enough for the board to decertify Ramos in April.

Buckley said Ramos being decertified in Illinois automatically disqualifies her from being certified as a police officer anywhere in the United States.