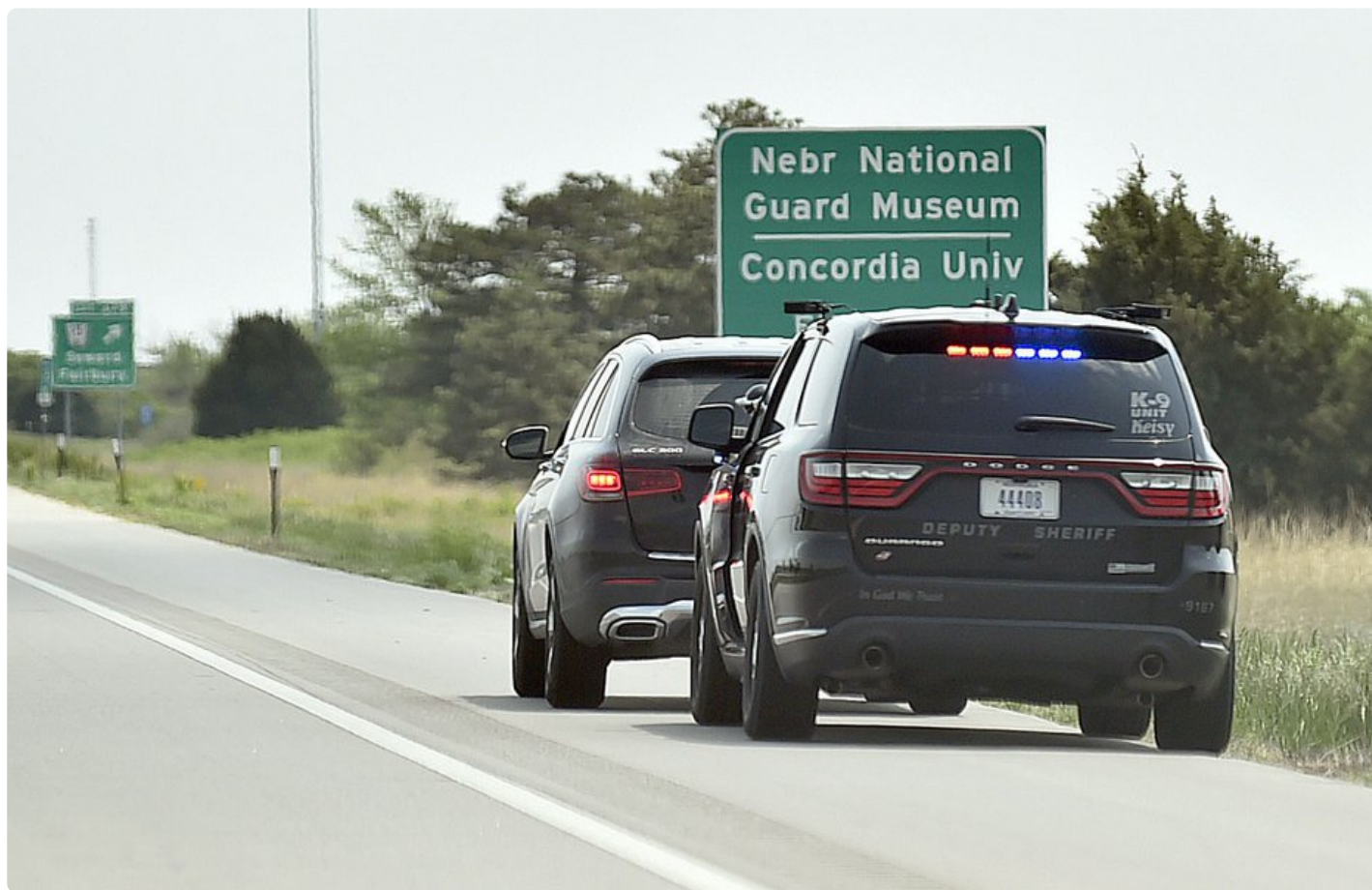


< News

Georgia fired a state trooper for his conduct. Now he leads Seward County's Homeland Security task force.

By Natalia Alamdari, Flatwater Free Press | Aug. 3, 2023, 4 p.m. · 8 min read



A Seward County deputy in a discreetly marked K-9 unit pulls over a Mercedes SUV on May 24, just west of Nebraska Highway 15 on eastbound Interstate 80. (Photo by Eric Gregory/Flatwater Free Press)

The Seward County Homeland Security task force, sometimes using the controversial practice of civil asset forfeiture, seized \$11.8 million from Interstate 80 drivers through civil and criminal forfeiture in its

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banned from becoming a Nebraska police officer himself.

Blake Swicord was fired as a state trooper in Georgia after selling guns to a pardoned felon and allegedly sending sexually explicit texts and photos from his police-issued phone. Swicord, who claims he was wrongfully terminated, then was arrested on suspicion of battery following an alleged domestic violence incident with his then-girlfriend.

The Nebraska agency in charge of law enforcement training has twice denied Swicord admission, saying he didn't meet the good character requirement for entry. That agency said Swicord failed to disclose his arrest or his firing on his application, **as first reported by the Lincoln Journal Star**. On Friday, the Nebraska Supreme Court dismissed his latest appeal.

Homeland Security officials told the Flatwater Free Press this week that they had no knowledge of Swicord's previous dismissal or arrest when he was first placed into a Homeland Security role in 2019. They said they learned of Swicord's troubles in April 2021, when an assistant U.S. attorney told the agency that the Nebraska Supreme Court had denied Swicord's first appeal in his quest for police certification.

Swicord will remain in his job as task force coordinator as he continues his legal battle, Seward County Sheriff Mike Vance told a reporter during Tuesday's Seward County Board meeting.

Vance has previously said he would have to let Swicord go if he can't become a Nebraska police officer. Vance and dozens of Swicord's colleagues have praised the 27-year police veteran for his leadership, interdiction skills and professionalism.

"Since his employment with my agency, Mr. Swicord has shown nothing but the upmost integrity and professionalism," Vance wrote supporting Swicord in 2019. "After conducting this extensive background check I feel very sure that Mr. Swicord is a man of integrity and very honest at all times."

The Police Standards Advisory Council, which oversees law enforcement certification in Nebraska, has acknowledged Swicord's qualifications. It also ruled twice that he can't go through training to become a Nebraska police officer.

"His actions in the application process demonstrate to this body that the petitioner cannot be considered to be a person who can be characterized as being truthful, honest or trustworthy," the council wrote in its 2019 decision.

In January 2020, Vance stood before the Seward County Board with a request: Create a temporary six-month position for the county's drug interdiction task force.

Drug interdiction is big business in Seward County. Homeland Security has given multiple awards to the Seward task force for being the best in the country.

Seward County has accounted for a third of all civil asset forfeiture cases in state court in the past decade in Nebraska, an FFP analysis found. Civil asset forfeiture allows law enforcement to seize money without convicting or even charging drivers of a crime.

In five years, Seward County law enforcement have hauled in \$7.5 million through civil and criminal forfeitures.

The job Vance wanted to create would be open to civilians. It would require qualifications like 10 years of law enforcement experience and 100 hours of interdiction training. And it would replace the captain's position Swicord had just vacated.

Vance had hired Swicord in 2019 as commander of the interdiction task force. Swicord had spent years perfecting and teaching the art of spotting crime on the country's interstates. He and Vance met through Desert Snow, an interdiction training company owned by fellow Seward deputy David Frye.

But Swicord had been forced to resign that captain's position in early 2020 after he was unable to become a certified police officer.

Days later, the county board approved the new, temporary position. Then Vance hired a familiar person for the role: Blake Swicord.

Six months later, Vance went before the board again – this time, requesting to make the temporary position permanent.

Darrell Zabrocki – then a candidate for the county board – questioned the move at that board meeting, **the Journal Star reported.**

Zabrocki, a former Sarpy County sheriff's deputy, said the civilian position was "nothing more" than a way to circumvent the normal hiring process.

"The current police climate in the country requires law enforcement to do it better, do it cleaner, and to follow statute and policy at a level greater than ever before," Zabrocki said then.

The board unanimously approved the position.

Zabrocki, who won his election for the county board, declined to comment for this story.

Other area politicians also declined to comment.

John Culver, board chair, declined an interview, but said in an email that he trusts Vance's decision to keep Swicord on the job. Raegan Hain, another board member, didn't respond to a voicemail.

Misty Ahmic, who wasn't a board member when the job was created, said the board is only responsible for approving job descriptions, not hiring and firing.

"That would be on the sheriff's side to oversee," Ahmic said. "The board is not responsible for that. It doesn't fall on me to make that decision. And so I don't think that my opinion is relevant."

When asked for comment, County Attorney Wendy Elston wrote in an email that the sheriff has broad authority "to oversee his department's personnel matters."

Swicord didn't respond to emails seeking comment. Both Seward's past and current state senators declined to comment.

"I have heard about this issue and on the peripheral am aware of what is going on. It would be inappropriate for me to speculate on matters in which I have no direct involvement or oversight," Sen. Jana Hughes said.

Kenneth Schmieding, a board member who voted on Swicord's job description, said in a phone call that at the time he knew "there was controversy" but that they "left it to the sheriff's discretion."

The controversy started with a 2017 FBI raid on two restaurants in Milledgeville, Georgia, according to Georgia law enforcement records.

During the raid, investigators found firearms. The owner – convicted of a felony in 1999 – said the guns were purchased from his friend: Swicord.

The man was pardoned and had his firearm rights reinstated in 2011. But the raid launched an internal affairs investigation into Swicord, placing him on paid leave for nine months.

The investigation's findings: Swicord associated with a person with a criminal background, breaking department policy; used his state-issued phone to send sexually explicit photos and texts; violated policy by working security for a concert after his request was denied; and used his position to get a police officer to erase a traffic citation issued to his girlfriend.

In December 2017, Swicord was fired for "misconduct, conduct reflecting discredit on the department, or insubordination."

Swicord filed a claim of wrongful termination. He said he was never paid to work concert security. He said he had only asked the police officer to move a court date for his then-girlfriend. He has acknowledged the inappropriate texts but said the inappropriate photo was an image sent by his then-wife, sharing

how a medical procedure was healing. The investigation was politically motivated, he said, after he'd been outspoken about overtime pay and other department issues.

"I am convinced the agency used this situation as an opportunity to dig and seek out anything that could be used against me and my employment," he wrote when asking the then-director of the Nebraska Law Enforcement Training Center to reconsider her denial.

A month after his firing, Swicord was arrested for battery, in a domestic violence incident where he backhanded a woman in the face, according to a police incident report. Prosecutors then dropped the charge.

A year later he arrived in Seward County.

In 2019, Vance told the Journal Star he was aware of Swicord's past termination and arrest. After looking into it, he decided to continue with the hire.

"I just decided a man with this kind of experience that dedicated his life to law enforcement ... I just figured because he hadn't done anything wrong, he deserved a chance," Vance told the Journal Star.

Swicord first applied for reciprocity certification – an accelerated training program for law enforcement officers already certified in another state.

But his application was denied because of how he answered two questions:

"Have you ever, either as an adult or juvenile, been cited, arrested, charged or convicted for a violation of any law?"

Swicord answered no.

He first claimed he misunderstood the question. He later said he answered "no" under the advice of his attorney.

"My stance was that I should never have been arrested in the first place," Swicord said in a hearing before the Police Standards Advisory Council. "So why should that be detrimental to me?"

The second question read: "Have you ever had a professional license that you hold be under investigation?"

Swicord answered no.

He told the council that he misunderstood the question, and never considered his law enforcement certification to be a professional license. Instead, he said he thought the question was describing a

driver's license, or medical license.

The Police Standards Advisory Council was unmoved.

"As a well-educated individual, and an experienced law enforcement officer ... this 'misunderstanding' doesn't seem credible to this body," the council wrote in its decision. "His deliberate omissions, falsifications and misrepresentations are certainly grounds for denial in this case."

Swicord appealed to the Nebraska Supreme Court. It upheld the decision to bar him from accelerated training.

He applied for 16-week basic training, this time checking "yes" on the two questions that had previously landed him in hot water.

That application was also denied.

Thirty-one of Swicord's law enforcement colleagues vouched for his character and leadership during his appeal. But the council still upheld its decision.

"The petitioner puts forward the notion that by simply checking the correct boxes on his Personal Character Affidavit for Basic Certification, his previous misdeeds should be forgiven," the council wrote. The petitioner has sought to minimize his actions."

Swicord once again appealed. The Nebraska Supreme Court decided Friday to dismiss the case. Swicord plans to continue litigation, Vance said.

In 2020, Georgia officials recommended revoking Swicord's law enforcement certification. The appeals process is still pending. A revoked Georgia license would keep him from becoming a Nebraska police officer.

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