



CLAY COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE
SHERIFF MICHELLE COOK

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Subject: Internal Affairs Summation #AI2024-028
Date: February 5, 2025
To: Sheriff Michelle Cook via Chain of Command
From: Sgt. Keith Smith #6445
Reference: Policy Code of Conduct 1000.02 G. 1. Unbecoming, immoral or detrimental conduct.

Complainant: Clay County Sheriff's Office/Howard Fryer (Citizen)
Principals Deputy Sherri Leach #9805
Witnesses: Sgt. Sarah Taylor 09799
Lt. Michael Kirchner 06916
ASA Pam Hazel
Involved: Sentencing Phase of Corey Binderim Trial

Synopsis

This report summarizes the investigation into allegations against Deputy Sherri Leach #9805 for violating sheriff's office policy G.O. 1000.02 – Code of Conduct G. Unbecoming, immoral or detrimental conduct.

On 10/16/2024, the sentencing phase of convicted murderer Corey Binderim, was taking place at the Clay County Courthouse. Deputy Leach testified as a character witness for Mr. Binderim. Deputy Leach identified herself as a member of the Clay County Sheriff's Office and described her role with the sheriff's office. The case against Corey Binderim was prosecuted by the SAO 4th Judicial Circuit which encompasses Clay County Florida. The Clay County Sheriff's Office was the arresting agency of Corey Binderim. The testimony provided by Deputy Leach was broadcast live as well as posted on YouTube.

Details of Investigation

On 10/26/2024, this incident was documented in the IAPro complaint module for Administrative Inquiry investigation under sequence number #AI2024-028.

Evidence Collection

The following evidence was discovered during the course of this investigation. All documents, audio and video files are uploaded to the case file in IAPro. For complete details please review these files:

- Email from Deputy Leach to Sgt. Sarah Taylor with subpoena attached.
- YouTube Video Link of Trial with Deputy Leach's testimony.
- Copy of Sherri Leach Subpoena
- Notes of conversation with State Attorney Pam Hazel
- Text chain between Sgt. Smith and Citizen (at that time) Sherri Leach

Investigative Findings

On 10/23/2024, an email was received from a Clay County citizen, advising they felt it was a conflict of interest having a member of the Clay County Sheriff's Office testify on behalf of a convicted felon (murder). It was verified that Deputy Leach testified during the penalty phase for convicted murderer Corey Binderim. The link to the YouTube video was reviewed in its entirety. The portion of Deputy Leach's testimony, 31:09, was reviewed twice to ensure all content. Deputy Leach used the following words and statements to describe Corey Binderim; *"Don't remember a life without Corey", "Amazing Father involved in everything", "Ultimate cheer dad", "He cares about people", "Passionate", "Was raised to take care of people", "He loves babies", "Got into trouble for things he didn't do".*

Notifications and Interviews

Unless otherwise noted, all of the following notifications, interviews, meetings, etc., conducted in the course of this investigation were recorded in audio format. All of the audio recordings are digitally attached to this case file and stored under this sequence number in IAPro. Additionally, all of the pertinent sworn testimony was documented in this report via summary format. To obtain complete details, review the audio recordings in their entirety.

Principal Notification: Deputy Sherri Leach #9805

On 10/30/2024, I conducted the principal notification with Deputy Sherri Leach at the Internal Affairs office located at 1845 Town Center Blvd., Suite 500 in Fleming Island. Deputy Leach was presented with the following documents:

- Member Notification of Internal Affairs Investigation
- Administrative Rights
- Notification of Florida Police Bill of Rights
- Garrity Warning
- Perjury Warning

Deputy Leach signed all documents confirming her understanding and the receipt of her administrative rights. I explained the Administrative Investigation process, provided her with copies of the documents and concluded the notification.

Witness: ASA Pam Hazel

On 11/25/2025, contact was made with Division Chief Pamela Hazel of the States Attorney's Office in regards to this case. ASA Pam Hazel was questioned about the subpoena Deputy Leach received in this case. ASA Pam Hazel advised the SAO did not subpoena Deputy Leach, advising the subpoena came from Corey Binderim's defense team. ASA Pam Hazel advised the subpoena was likely for character witness testimony.

ASA Pam Hazel was asked if Deputy Leach was required to testify to Binderim's character. ASA Pam Hazel advised technically Deputy Leach was subpoenaed in the case and would therefore be required to respond to the subpoena. ASA Pam Hazel did advise in her experience, if an individual was subpoenaed to testify as a character witness and contacted the attorney issuing the subpoena, they would not have to testify and would not be held in contempt of court. ASA Pam Hazel advised several witnesses elected not to testify in the trial, specifically naming the two children of the defendant, and an additional witness who left court due to having prior arrangements. ASA Pam Hazel advised that none of these witnesses were held in contempt of court. ASA PAM Hazel advised that she could not recall one case where a character witness was held in contempt of court for not testifying.

Principal Evidence Review: Deputy Sherri Leach #9805

On 01/31/2024, an evidence review was conducted with Deputy Leach. Deputy Leach was provided a USB Thumb Drive which contained the following evidence:

- Copy of Sherri Leach Subpoena
- Email from Deputy Leach to Sgt. Sarah Taylor
- Copy of Link to Deputy Leach Court Testimony
- Notes of conversation with State Attorney Pam Hazel

Deputy Leach confirmed receipt of the evidence listed above and advised she would be reviewing the evidence with her representative and would make contact back when she had completed her evidence review.

Deputy Leach made contact and advised she would be prepared to conduct her principal interview on February 4th, 2025, at 1100.

Principal Interview: Deputy Sherri Leach #9805

On February 4, 2025, Internal Affairs obtained a sworn recorded statement from Deputy Sherri Leach at the Internal Affairs office located at 1845 Town Center Blvd., Suite 500, Fleming Island. Also present were Florida Deputy Sheriff's Association representative John Whitaker.

Deputy Leach was reminded of the previous forms she had been served with on October 30th, 2024, and provided the following sworn statement.

Deputy Leach advised she became involved with an individual's murder trial after being contacted by a litigation specialist. Deputy Leach stated that she and several family members of the convicted murder's family met with the litigation specialist to provide information about the subjects past. Deputy Leach stated the meeting with the litigation specialist took place many months before the trial and while she was unemployed. Deputy Leach advised she was not sure who the "litigation specialist" fell under as far as the SAO or the Defense Attorney, but this is who she had met with. The meeting with the litigation specialist in person.

*****It should be noted that a business card discovered at a later date in a text chain, shows that Deputy Leach met with a "mitigation specialist" not a "litigation specialist."*****

Deputy Leach was asked about the subpoena that she had been served. Deputy Leach stated when she was served the subpoena to appear at Corey Binderim's trial (Convicted Murderer) she had never spoken to any attorneys about the trial and reiterated that the litigation specialist is the only person she had ever spoken with leading up to this trial. Deputy Leach stated she was employed with CCSO when she was served the subpoena. Deputy Leach stated that when she was served the subpoena, the defense attorney called her and advised her that he wasn't sure if he would even need her, but if they did it would be during the sentencing phase of the trial. Deputy Leach stated when she spoke to the defense attorney, she advised him that she was *"Not Comfortable with it"* and the defense attorney advised her, *"Well it's a subpoena, we served you a subpoena."* Deputy Leach stated she did not condone what "Corey" did and didn't want to be associated with him. Deputy Leach stated she even looked up what the consequences may be if she didn't show up for the subpoena. Deputy Leach stated she contacted her immediate supervisor, Sgt. Sarah Taylor, after receiving the subpoena and emailed her sergeant hoping she would get *"Some guidance"* on trying to get out of appearing based on the subpoena. Deputy Leach stated she never heard back from anyone. Deputy Leach stated when she didn't hear from anyone, she called Sgt. Taylor and asked her to come by the school so she could speak with Sgt. Taylor. Deputy Leach stated she was not sure if Sgt. Taylor ever sent her email up the chain of command, but she had never heard back from anyone.

Deputy Leach stated that during the trial, she heard from the defense attorney several times, advising her when she may need to appear before the court. Deputy Leach was questioned again about speaking with the defense attorney about the subpoena. Deputy Leach was asked when she spoke with the defense attorney, did they discuss what she needed or had to say and Deputy Leach stated, *"Absolutely not."* Deputy Leach stated she went in there and stated the truth of any questions that she was asked. Deputy Leach stated the comments and references she used were of her choosing.

Deputy Leach was then questioned about the specific comments she had made while appearing in the courtroom while on the stand. Deputy Leach was asked if she knew the defense attorney was going to ask her about being employed by the Clay County Sheriff's Office. Deputy Leach stated that she did not she was going to be asked about her employment. Deputy Leach was asked if she felt she could have stated when the questioning started, that she could have stated this was a conflict and didn't feel comfortable doing this. Deputy Leach stated that had her chain of command told her this or had given her some options, but she didn't have any idea of knowing what her options were. Deputy Leach was asked if she inquired about going and speaking with her chain of command to get some guidance. Deputy Leach again stated that she had asked her sergeant about this and didn't receive any guidance after asking her. Deputy Leach was asked, since she hadn't received any feedback from her chain of command, did she think to reach out to her lieutenant to gather some guidance. Deputy Leach stated she didn't feel comfortable going around her sergeant. Deputy Leach was questioned again about her originally advising the defense attorney over the phone that she didn't feel comfortable appearing in the courtroom,

why didn't she feel she could state this from the stand on the day of the testimony. Deputy Leach's response was, *"I just think it's my duty to uphold the law and if you are given a subpoena then you have to go to court."* Deputy Leach was reminded that the question wasn't about appearing in court, it was about what she could have stated to the court about appearing. Deputy Leach stated that she didn't feel it was an option to advise the court of her original response to the defense attorney. Deputy Leach was reminded of her original statements in this interview, which were she was uncomfortable and apprehensive about appearing in court. Deputy Leach then once again stated that *"If I had received some guidance from someone, then I probably would have gone that route."*

Deputy Leach was reminded that it was our agency that investigated this case, and she was reminded of her comments that were made from the stand:

"Don't remember a life without Corey."

"Amazing father involved in everything."

"Ultimate cheer dad."

"He loves babies."

Deputy Leach confirmed these were true and accurate statements that she had made during her testimony. Deputy Leach was then reminded of her last statement she made while on the stand, *"Got into trouble for things he didn't do."* Deputy Leach responded by stating, *"That probably shouldn't have been said like that, I did say that and it is true." That wasn't in correlation to this case obviously, but I probably shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean in context with this."* Deputy Leach went on to explain she thought she had explained that earlier when she was referring to him (Corey) getting into trouble for things his sister did. Deputy Leach was asked if she made this last statement because she felt the individual she spoke out about was innocent. Deputy Leach stated she never felt the individual was not guilty. Deputy Leach was asked if she thought her actions brought the sheriff's office into a negative light by her speaking during the trial. Deputy Leach stated, *"She didn't feel like she had a choice."* Deputy Leach was asked again if she felt her actions brought the sheriff's office reputation into a negative light. Deputy Leach responded that she felt she didn't have options and spoke the truth and answered the questions.

Deputy Leach was asked again about her *"options."* Deputy Leach was asked if she ever had any instances in the past where she didn't get a problem resolved by her sergeant. Deputy Leach referred to a time when her "Schoolboard sergeant" handled a complaint and she had to go to her lieutenant. Deputy Leach was asked why she felt comfortable *"going around"* her sergeant for this but didn't feel comfortable *"going around"* her sergeant for guidance in relation to receiving guidance in this incident. Deputy Leach consistently stated she didn't not realize it was an option.

Deputy Leach did not provide any further pertinent information. The interview was subsequently concluded.

Based on Deputy Leach's statements about her supervisors, interviews were scheduled with Sgt. Sarah Taylo and Lt. Michael Kirchner.

Witness Interview: Sgt. Sarah Taylor #9799

On February 6, 2025, Internal Affairs obtained a sworn recorded statement from Sgt. Sarah Taylor, at the Internal Affairs Office located at 1845 Town Center Blvd. Suite 500. Sgt. Taylor was presented with an Internal Affairs Member Witness form, which she signed and initialed in all sections, confirming her understanding of its contents. Sgt. Taylor provided the following sworn statement:

Sgt. Taylor was asked if she recognized an email that was sent to her by Deputy Leach on August 27th, 2024. Sgt. Taylor stated she recognized the email and remembered having a conversation with Deputy Leach. Sgt. Taylor stated she believed Deputy Leach contacted her before sending the email and spoke with her. Sgt. Taylor stated she recalled the conversation and stated Deputy Leach advised her of a previous internal she (Deputy Leach) had been involved in involving phone calls to the same subject the subpoena was for while he had been incarcerated, and that Deputy Leach had received discipline for this. This previous incident occurred when Sgt. Taylor was not employed here, but Deputy Leach wanted to fill her in. Sgt. Taylor stated that Deputy Leach advised her that the defense attorney in this case had reached out and wanted Deputy Leach to be a character witness if the trial should come to the sentencing phase. Sgt. Taylor stated that what she took from the conversation was Deputy Leach informing her of the dates and that Sgt. Taylor was going to find coverage for the school. Sgt. Taylor was asked if Deputy Leach was uncomfortable or gave the impression, she was trying to disassociate herself or asking for guidance on this situation, Sgt. Taylor responded, "No." Sgt. Taylor stated she did not get anything like that on what Deputy Leach was conveying in the conversation. Sgt. Taylor stated again that she gathered from the conversation that Deputy Leach was just letting her know the dates of the subpoena and stated that Deputy Leach would let her know when the dates approached on what exact dates, she would need to be off. Sgt. Taylor was asked if Deputy Leach ever approached her about "Going around" her to speak with the lieutenant or assistant chief to get some guidance on how to handle this, which Sgt. Taylor responded, "No she did not." Sgt. Taylor was asked if Deputy Leach had ever shared any information about having any type of contact with the defense attorney in this case. Sgt. Taylor advised that Deputy Leach told her, during their conversation, that the defense attorney had reached out and Deputy Leach had advised him that she had already been in trouble before because of this, but if you subpoena me I'll have to talk. Sgt. Taylor stated that she took this as if Deputy Leach was informing the defense attorney, "If you subpoena me, I'll be forced to talk, is how I took it."

Sgt. Taylor did not provide any further pertinent information. The interview was subsequently concluded.

Witness Interview: Lt. Micheal Kirchner #6854

On February 6, 2025, Internal Affairs obtained a sworn recorded statement from Lt. Micheal Kirchner, at the Internal Affairs Office located at 1845 Town Center Blvd. Suite 500. Lt. Kirchner was presented with an Internal Affairs Member Witness form, which he signed and initialed in all sections, confirming his understanding of its contents. Lt. Kirchner provided the following sworn statement:

Lt. Kirchner confirmed that Deputy Leach does work for him and has been assigned to his unit since last year when CCSO implemented the SRO program in 2024. Lt. Kirchner advised he was aware of a current IA investigation involving Deputy Leach. Lt. Kirchner was asked if recalled receiving an email from Sgt. Taylor involving Deputy Leach needing to appear in court based on a subpoena Deputy Leach had received. Lt. Kirchner stated he did recall the email being sent to him. Lt. Kirchner stated that Sgt. Taylor conversed with him later, after receiving the email, that the subpoena attached to the email was for a defendant that Deputy Leach had been disciplined for having contact with while the defendant was incarcerated in the CCSO jail while awaiting trial in 2022, when Deputy Leach previously worked at CCSO. Lt. Kirchner was asked when he spoke to Sgt. Taylor about the email, did Sgt. Taylor convey any concerns or communicate that Deputy Leach was wanting some guidance on what to do about receiving the subpoena. Lt. Kirchner advised that nothing like that was communicated to him. Lt. Kirchner stated he looked at the email as Sgt. Taylor was letting him know that Deputy Leach was going to be away from her school and the school was going to need coverage. Lt. Kirchner stated that he didn't have any communication with anyone other than letting A/C Clark know the email had been received and Deputy Leach was going to be away from her school. Lt. Kirchner stated that he looked at the whole thing as an "FYI" of Deputy Leach just knowing this had been received. Lt. Kirchner stated he never had or knew of any additional communication of this or that Deputy Leach had any concerns or was seeking guidance about receiving the subpoena.

Lt. Kirchner did not provide any further pertinent information. The interview was subsequently concluded.

Formal Principal Interview (2): Deputy Sherri Leach #9805

Note: Sergeant Smith voluntarily recused himself from this interview in order to avoid the perception of any impropriety, due to his previous interactions with Deputy Leach concerning matters involving this case. Sergeant Smith and Deputy Leach discussed

this case while Deputy Leach was employed as a police officer with the Clay County District Schools Police Department. This interview was conducted by Lt. Murphy, commander of the Internal Affairs Unit. Sergeant Smith was present for this interview.

Deputy Leach was reminded that she stated in her previous interview that she contacted her supervisor, Sergeant Taylor, for guidance on how to proceed with the subpoena. Deputy Leach indicated that she had communicated with Sergeant Taylor through email and that she thought she was clear in her statement that she had been previously disciplined for misconduct involving Corey Binderim (defendant), which is the reason she sent the email in the first place. Furthermore, Deputy Leach testified that she also had a phone conversation with Sergeant Taylor prior to sending the email, to inform her of the past issues. In her email, Deputy Leach referenced that the directives of the sustained administrative investigation instructed her to refrain from contacting defendant Binderim. Deputy Leach testified that she did not speak with Sergeant Taylor after she sent the email and that Sergeant Taylor had not contacted her either, for further clarification.

Internal Affairs explained to Deputy Leach that during the interview with Sergeant Taylor, Sergeant Taylor perceived that Deputy Leach did not want to avoid the subpoena and that she in fact, intended to proceed. Furthermore, Sergeant Taylor understood that Deputy Leach communicated to the defense attorney that the only way she (Leach) could get away with appearing in court, is if she was subpoenaed. Deputy Leach stated she did not say that to Sergeant Taylor. Deputy Leach went on to clarify her conversation with the attorney and how Sergeant Taylor's perception of their conversation could have been misconstrued. Deputy Leach again reiterated that she told the attorney that she was not permitted to participate, and that the attorney told Deputy Leach that he could subpoena her. Deputy Leach alleged that she told the attorney that he would have to subpoena her and that she didn't want anything to do with appearing in court. Deputy Leach clarified that she only spoke with the attorney for less than one minute, and then a short time later she received a subpoena. When asked if she encouraged the attorney to subpoena her, she stated, *"Absolutely not."*

Deputy Leach was reminded of her previous response to Sergeant Smith in her first interview concerning the mitigation specialist. Deputy Leach told Sergeant Smith that she did not know the mitigation specialist worked for the defense. Due to not understanding how the mitigation specialist was compatible with the case, she called Sergeant Smith to get guidance on how to proceed. Deputy Leach stated that the mitigation specialist contacted her to gather information in order to get defendant Binderim into a *"faith-based program"* and she was looking for information regarding defendant Binderim's childhood. Deputy Leach stated that Sergeant Smith told her that she could proceed to discuss certain matters as long as she does not discuss the case.

Note: Sgt. Smith did not have any recollection of this phone call. It does show in the phone call log that a phone call took place in May of 2024 on Sgt. Smith's departmental phone.

Deputy Leach was reminded that she reached out to Sergeant Smith for guidance on how to handle contact with the mitigation specialist. At that time, Deputy Leach did not work for CCSO and was still a police officer with the school police. She was asked to clarify why she placed her trust in Sergeant Smith for guidance on how to handle the mitigation specialist; however, she did not consult him regarding the subpoena, though he had detailed knowledge of the case. Deputy Leach explained that she felt as though she needed to contact her supervisor and chain of command in this case. She explained that she had already spoken to Sergeant Smith about the incident, and now that she works for CCSO she felt the responsibility to forward questions to her chain of command.

Internal Affairs played the video of Deputy Leach on the witness stand for clarification of her responses to questions asked by the defense attorney. While on the stand the defense attorney asked Deputy Leach to identify defendant Binderim, which she did. During her statements to the court, Deputy Leach took the initiative to address defendant Binderim by waving at him and saying "*hi, hi Corey*," even though she was not asked to do so. Deputy Leach made statements during this investigation that she was uncomfortable and did not want to participate in this hearing, however, she appears very comfortable and sympathetic to defendant Binderim, as she spoke and waved to him in open court. It should be noted that Deputy Leach identified herself as a deputy with the Clay County Sheriff's Office at the beginning of her appearance on the stand.

Deputy Leach testified in court that she met defendant Binderim at a young age, around one or two years old, and made the unsolicited statement, "*I don't remember life without Corey*." She was asked why she added that statement even though she was not asked. She explained she did not know why, and that there was no thought behind it. Deputy Leach also explained that she was aware that defendant Binderim had been convicted of murder, but alleged that she had not witnessed any of the trial and was not aware of any of the details of the case.

The defense attorney asked Deputy Leach if defendant Binderim was "*Hyperactive*" to which she answered, "*Yes, he is all over the place*." The defense attorney asked Deputy Leach if she knew if defendant Binderim's mother had him diagnosed with ADHD. Deputy Leach stated she did not believe he was diagnosed. Deputy Leach continued to explain that medical procedures to diagnose ADHD were not really done at that time. She seemed to be making an excuse for him not being diagnosed, although she is not a doctor of any kind. Deputy Leach continued her answer for approximately two minutes.

The defense attorney asked Deputy Leach if she remembered the first-time defendant Binderim got a car. Deputy Leach answered, yes, but began by explaining that she and the defendant got their driver's licenses together (except Corey failed), again speaking freely and openly about information she was not asked. She then provided specific details related to a vehicle crash defendant Binderim was involved in.

Deputy Leach was asked, by the defense attorney, to describe defendant Binderim's relationship with his father. Deputy Leach stated that his adoptive father (Eric Binderim) was very hard on defendant Binderim. The defense attorney asked Deputy Leach to describe her answer to the jury. Deputy Leach went on to describe various details and experiences growing up, specifically one statement she made *"if Rosie and I did something, when it was found out, Corey would take the fall for it."*

Leading up to her testifying in court, Deputy Leach pointed out that she had not slept for a week, alleged that she was extremely uncomfortable and did not want to be there and did not want anything to do with being in court.

The defense attorney asked Deputy Leach if Eric Binderim yelled at defendant Binderim a lot. Deputy Leach stated that he yelled all the time. Deputy Leach had previously stated that Mr. Binderim welcomed her and her newborn baby to his home, yet she is now describing him as *"scary"* and previously stated that she would sometimes hide from him.

Deputy Leach was questioned about her statements in reference to defendant Binderim not fighting back when describing his interactions with Eric Binderim. She clarified later in the interview that she meant the defendant never *"fought back"* verbally with Eric Binderim, and that there was never any physical abuse. During the interview, based on the statements made by Deputy Leach, it appeared reasonably certain, that Mr. Binderim was physically abusive to defendant Binderim. Deputy Leach clarified that she meant that they would not fight back verbally, not physically. Deputy Leach also clarified her statement that she and other family members would hide. She stated that they would not hide but would go to another part of the house to find something else to do. She stated, *"When I say hide, I wasn't meaning like we were hiding from him because he was going to hurt everybody, I meant like when he started yelling."*

The defense attorney asked Deputy Leach to describe an incident in which defendant Binderim broke his collar bone. She described the incident which occurred in the driveway of the home, and he fell off the skateboard. Deputy Leach stated that Mr. Binderim called defendant Binderim a *"sissy."*

The defense attorney asked Deputy Leach about the time defendant Binderim went wakeboarding. Deputy Leach provided the answer to the question. Deputy Leach was then asked how she knew to provide the answer, if she had not spoken with the defense attorney. She stated that it is a very common story told amongst their family, or his mother may have possibly provided the defense attorney with the information. However, the defense attorney asked about wake boarding, Deputy Leach provided a story in reference to Knee boarding and proceeded to talk about how he *"wiped out"* which resulted in a head injury. Deputy Leach was asked when defendant Binderim was taken to be treated for a head injury. She stated that it was after the weekend was over.

The defense attorney asked Deputy Leach if she was aware defendant Binderim was arrested for aggravated battery concerning a firearm. During her testimony concerning this question, Deputy Leach stated, "*It was so stupid.*" Deputy Leach explained that she was not allowed to explain what she meant by that statement. She believed his getaway plan was stupid, not the charges themselves. It should be noted that in this crime, the defendant was convicted of shooting people.

Note: Deputy Leach expressed that she did not want to appear in court to testify on defendant Binderim's behalf, yet she gave exaggerated answers to the defense attorney's questions pertaining to his childhood ADHD, specific answers to vague questions and implied, for a period of time, that the defendant was, at best, raised poorly, at worst he was abused. She appeared heartfelt and comfortable, waived and said hi to the defendant (by name) from the witness stand. Deputy Leach's behavior is inconsistent with her statements that she was uncomfortable with appearing in court.

Note: FSA attorney John Whittaker was present for this interview.

*****During the interview, Deputy Leach provided Lt. Murphy with a business card for Sara Baldwin "mitigation specialist." Lt. Murphy then looked up the defense attorney for the case in question and contacted both of them. Lt. Murphy provided me with the following summary of the phone calls with both individuals. The conversations were not recorded.*****

On 02-11-25 at approximately 1007 hours, I made contact with Patrick Korody, via phone (904-383-7261). Mr. Korody was the lead defense attorney for Corey Binderim.

Mr. Korody stated he could not remember speaking directly with D/S Leach. He stated she may have spoken with fellow attorney Jim Hernandez. He stated he does not recall being told that she did not feel comfortable being a character witness; however, he did state it was unusual to subpoena a character witness.

I then asked Mr. Korody if he told people they have other ways they can be character witnesses, for example they can write a letter. He stated he does not normally tell character witnesses that live in the county of the trial, they can write letters instead of appearing. Ironically, he then stated, he just subpoenas them.

Mr. Korody stated he would have Mr. Hernandez give me a call.

Mr. Hernandez never returned my call.

On 02-20-25, at approximately 1000 hours, I contacted Sara Baldwin via phone (904-463-3557). Sara Baldwin is the mitigation specialist that Deputy Leach spoke with. Sara Baldwin confirmed that she is hired by defense attorneys to speak with family members and friends of defendants to find information that may be used during the sentencing phase of a trial. She stated she does not tell people that she helps get defendants into faith-based programs in prison. She stated that does not make sense because that would be something for a member of the department of corrections to do. I clarified with her that she does not tell people that she needs information to help get defendants in faith-based programs and she said she does not.

*****This summary was forwarded to Deputy Leach and Mr. Whitaker. We explained to them we had no questions about this information, but wanted to provide them with an opportunity to respond, if they wished. Deputy Leach provided the following response,*****

I stand by my previous statements in regards to my conversation with Sara Baldwin where among many things we discussed was faith based programs. Her main focus was information on Corey's childhood as stated in text and interview.

1-Text to Keith Smith in May "She's literally investigating his childhood"

2-Initial interview at 2:07 "It was my understanding it was just to get some insight and information on Corey and who he was. She was trying to get him into a faith based program at the prison".

3-Initial interview at 6:13 "She was looking for information on his childhood, his history, growing up, his background".

-Sherri Leach

*****This concludes the investigative steps in this investigation.*****

Conclusion

This investigation concluded the allegations made against Deputy Sherri Leach pertain to violations of the following Clay County Sheriff's Office directives.

General Order - 1000.02 (Code of Conduct) Section III Constraints on Behavior

G. Unbecoming, immoral or detrimental conduct

4 – Examples of prohibited conduct include, but are not limited to:

F. Performing or making any verbal or written statements that **may** bring the office of the sheriff (Sheriff's Office) into disrepute or ridicule.

Disposition Recommendation

Deputy Sherri Leach

Allegation: Deputy Sherri Leach is alleged to have made verbal comments that could bring the sheriff's office reputation into disrepute, by testifying as character witness for a defendant during the sentencing phase who had been convicted of murder. This case was investigated by the Clay County Sheriff's Office and prosecuted by the Fourth Judicial Circuit.

Pertinent facts/evidence:

- Deputy Leach declared that she was employed as a deputy sheriff for the Clay County Sheriff's Office and did so in an open forum.
- Deputy Leach gave sworn testimony to the positive character of a person convicted of violently murdering an innocent victim of the community.
- The actions of making such statements concerning the character of defendant Binderim could bring discredit to the sheriff's office reputation and has the potential to cause the community to lose trust in the Clay County Sheriff's Office.
- Deputy Leach stated several times, in our interviews, that she was uncomfortable and wanted to remove herself from this. She also stated she never met or spoke with the defense attorney. However, during the testimony, the defense attorney asked very vague open questions and Deputy Leach knew what incident the defense attorney was referencing.
- Deputy Leach closed out her testimony by making the statement, "*Got into trouble for things he didn't do.*" Referring to the defendant. Deputy Leach responded by stating, "*That probably shouldn't have been said like that, I did say that, and it is true.*"
- Deputy Leach sent an email to her sergeant about this event and had a conversation with the same sergeant. She and her sergeant disagree on the content and meaning of the conversation.
- Deputy Leach did not reach out to IA or Sergeant Smith for guidance. She stated she used her chain of command and did not want to go around them.

Recommendation: **Sustained**

Prior Disciplinary Action

IAPRO AI2024-028-Current

****Note:** Deputy Leach was a previous employee from 07/21/2020-01/13/2023 and was the principal in AI2022-004, which was involving employee misconduct, related to the same individual, Corey Binderim. AI2022-024 was sustained, and Deputy Leach received a WRIL-5 day suspension.

Enclosures

The following documents, recordings and evidence are digitally stored or uploaded to IAPro:

- Internal Affairs Forms Letters and Reports
- Sheriff's Office Directives
- Interviews and Recordings
- Supporting Documents
- Videos
- Any Tolling Documents

"I the undersigned, do hereby swear, under penalty of perjury that, to the best of my knowledge, information and belief, I have not knowingly or willfully deprived, or allowed another person to deprive, the subject of the investigation of any rights contained in ss. 112.532 and 112.533, Florida Statutes."

"Pursuant to FSS 92.525, I declare that the foregoing document and the facts contained therein are true to the best of my knowledge and belief."

Respectfully submitted,



Sgt. Keith Smith #6445
Internal Affairs Unit