



Martha's Vineyard detective fired for conducting illegal background checks



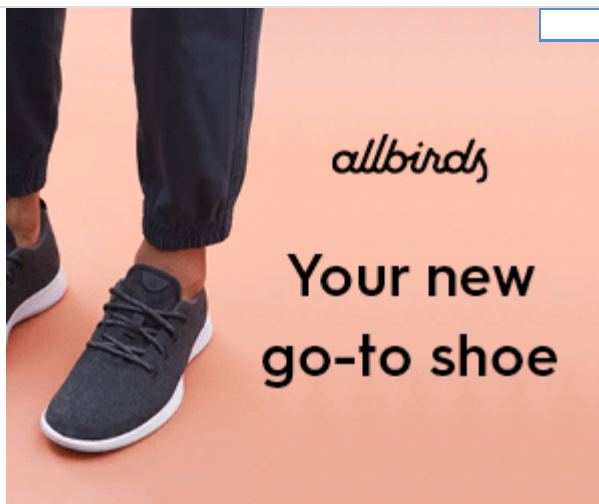
By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 21, 2018

A veteran detective was fired from a Martha's Vineyard police force this month for allegedly conducting illegal background checks — a problem that surfaced after a separate investigation found packages filled with large amounts of cocaine had been delivered to a tenant living inside his home, police officials said. Investigators said they did not believe Oak Bluffs Police Detective James T. Morse was involved in the alleged drug trafficking.

But an internal probe into the drug case led officials to uncover Morse had used police computers while on duty over the last year to look up the criminal histories for a “large” number of people not associated with any recent cases, according to an internal report.

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“It is unclear of the motive for Detective Morse to access these individuals as he refused to answer our questions by exercising his constitutional rights,” Lieutenant Timothy P. Williamson wrote in the Nov. 15 internal affairs report. “I can only surmise that it was not for any official police business.”

Morse worked for the department for the past two decades and is also an attorney. He declined to comment when reached by phone at his law office Tuesday.

His firing and the circumstances around it were first reported by [The Martha's Vineyard Times](#) and the [Vineyard Gazette](#).

The probe into Morse began Oct. 9 when, according to the internal report, Williamson said he was told that troopers involved in a yearlong drug investigation had found multiple packages containing a total of about three kilograms of cocaine had been delivered during the summer to a tenant who was living in Morse's home, a condominium in Falmouth.

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Property records show Morse owns a two-bedroom, one-bathroom condo in that town assessed for tax purposes at about \$340,000.

Williamson wrote he was told there was “no indication or information that Morse had any involved in the [drug] activity other that [sic] he believed that Morse rented a room to the target.”

Still department officials placed Morse on administrative leave while they launched an internal investigation, the report said.

When department officials asked Morse a series of questions about the packages and his tenant, who had moved out in mid-September, Morse declined to answer one about background checks, the report said. Morse cited his constitutional right to refuse to answer.

That prompted the department to audit background checks Morse had run over the past year, which uncovered he had improperly searched the state's Criminal Justice Information System for numerous individuals' Criminal Offender Record Information, or CORI.

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Morse declined to answer questions from the department about those searches.

A person's CORI record potentially includes a person's complete criminal history — or “rap sheet” — including arrests, criminal charges, judicial proceedings, sentencing, incarceration, rehabilitation, and release in Massachusetts.

Access to much of the data is restricted to law enforcement agencies, licensing agencies, employers, and others with a reason to view the information. There are strict rules about under what circumstances and how the information can be accessed, stored, and shared.

Oak Bluffs Chief Erik Blake said by phone Tuesday he still does not know why Morse ran the background checks in question. He said the matter has been referred to the state's Criminal Record Review Board, which handles complaints about CORI law violations.

The board can impose penalties, including civil fines up to \$5,000 per offense, and it can refer cases for criminal prosecution.

As for the drug investigation, Blake said Morse's former tenant was arrested, but declined to provide the person's name or other details, saying the investigation is ongoing and his department is not involved. State Police troopers assigned to the Cape and Islands district attorney's office have assisted with the drug probe, which is an ongoing multi-agency effort, officials from both agencies said, declining to comment further.

Blake expressed disappointment over the matter but said he hopes the case will serve as a lesson for his department of about 20 sworn officers.

“We acted swiftly and did what we considered to be right,” Blake said. “I think the men and women that work here wish him well, but at the same time what had to happen happened, and hopefully everyone learns from this.”

“We're held to a higher standard and we're expected to know all the laws,” he added.

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