

Postmaster

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articles about Genkinger’s suspension, Winonans have approached him with complaints of mail theft that occurred in previous years, but that he has not received any complaints of recent, suspected mail theft.

Federal prosecutors charged Genkinger this May with one count of the delay or destruction of mail. According to court records, Genkinger admitted to destroying three postcards that were in the mail sometime last summer, between June 1 and July 31, 2018. She pled guilty on June 12, 2019.

In October, a federal judge is scheduled to sentence Genkinger. A plea agreement between Genkinger and the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Minnesota advised the judge that Genkinger’s offense and her lack of criminal history falls into a category where federal sentencing guidelines suggest a zero- to six-month prison sentence. On the one hand, the plea deal recommends heightening that sentence because Genkinger “abused a position of public trust in a manner that significantly facilitated the commission or concealment” of her crime, but on the other hand, it recommends waiving a stiffer punishment because, the deal states, Genkinger has accepted responsibility for her crime and agreed to cooperate with investigators. As part of the deal, prosecutors agreed to seek a sentence of probation and community service. The plea deal bars Genkinger from future employment with the USPS.

The former postmaster’s actual sentence is up for a judge to decide.

Staff at the U.S. Attorney’s Office declined to answer questions about the case and the plea deal, saying prosecutors would not comment until Genkinger is sentenced.

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policeblotter

Winona Police

Wednesday, July 10

- At 11:35 a.m. a Winona man reported the theft of a white 2006 Dodge truck from the Affordable Auto lot on the 750 block of East Third Street. The car was later recovered.
- At 1:23 p.m. a Sinclair employee reported the theft of gas with a value of \$38.50 from the Sinclair gas station on the 1650 block of West Service Drive.
- At 1:54 p.m. a pink children’s Trek bicycle with a black basket was reported stolen from the Aquatic Center.
- At 3:18 p.m. police arrested Brett Allen Maus, 29, and referred him to the county attorney for potential charges of third-degree driving while intoxicated and intent to escape motor-vehicle tax after officers responded to a report of a man sleeping in his vehicle on the 1450 block of Prairie Island Road. Maus reportedly had a blood-alcohol content measured at .25 percent.
- At 4:01 p.m. an employee of Freedom Valu Center in downtown Winona reported the theft of gas with a value of \$10.
- At 5:36 p.m. a Winona woman reported that her car had been struck by two BB gun pellets near the intersection of Broadway and Pelzer Street.
- At 5:56 p.m. police arrested Liza Jane McIntire, 40, of Winona, and referred her to the county attorney for a potential charge of first-degree driving while intoxicated after officers received a report of a vehicle hitting the retaining wall outside the Super 8 motel on the 1000 block of Sugar Loaf Road. McIntire reportedly had a blood-alcohol content measured at .28 percent.
- At 6:09 p.m. a Winona man reported the theft of a black mountain bike with white stickers from the Aquatic Center.

Thursday, July 11

- At 1:11 p.m. a Winona man reported that someone had broken the rear window of his vehicle on the 500 block of Center Street.
- At 2:52 p.m. a staff member at Saint Anne reported the theft of \$30 from the room of a male resident.
- At 4:07 p.m. a Winona man reported the theft of a neon green BMX-style bicycle, with a value of \$150 to \$300, from the 550 block of Huff Street.
- At 6:11 p.m. police cited Marcell Nigel Coker, 41, of Winona, with theft by shoplifting from Walmart after he allegedly stole a bag of items with a total value of \$289.74.

Friday, July 12

- At 12:48 a.m. police cited Rhiannon Marie Ebert, 18, of St. Paul, Minn., and Lauren Elizabeth Jerikovski, 19, of Inver Grove Heights, Minn., with underage consumption of alcohol after they were allegedly found urinating on the side of a building on the 100 block of West Second Street. Ebert reportedly had a blood-alcohol content measured at .16 percent, and Jerikovski reportedly had a blood-alcohol content measured at .24 percent.

Winona County Sheriff

Wednesday, July 10

- At 4:30 p.m. deputies responded to a report from a Winona woman regarding a suspicious package delivered to her residence on the 24000 block of Blackberry Road, which contained a large amount of a powdery, white substance. The substance was sent in for testing.

New Winona Postmaster sworn in



Photo by Chris Rogers

■ U.S. Postal Service Manager of Post Office Operations Libby Gulden (right) administered the oath of office to Winona’s new postmaster, Dale Zintman (left), last Friday.

by CHRIS ROGERS

Dale Zintman took the oath of office as Winona’s new postmaster last Friday. Zintman has been managing the Winona Post Office as the officer-in-charge since last October, when former postmaster Sherri Jo Genkinger was suspended pending an investigation. “I strive to renew confidence in the Postal Service with our Winona customers and provide excellent service in all aspects,” Zintman said in a statement.

In an interview, Zintman said, “We’ll move forward and restore the trust of the community.” He added, “If you don’t have trust, you’re going to be losing customers. They trust us to get their bills delivered on time, to get their packages there on time.”

Zintman is a 21-year veteran of the U.S. Postal Service and familiar face at the Winona Post Office. He recently worked as postmaster in Cochrane, West Salem, and Luck, Wis., as well as supervisor of cus-

tomers services in Winona and Rochester, Minn., and he carried mail for the Winona Post Office for 10 years earlier in his career.

“I think I’m well prepared because I’ve been in this office for about 11 years,” Zintman said, referring to his past experience as a manager. “It’s a big responsibility, but we do have a lot of good employees here.”

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WPD officers train for crisis intervention

by NATHANIEL NELSON

Winona — like many cities across the state — has experienced an increase in mental illness over the past few years and, as a result, more people are having difficulty finding the treatment they need. When a crisis arises, and those suffering become a risk to themselves or others, law enforcement may be called in to help. In the past, only a few officers were trained for mental health calls, but this year, that is beginning to change — all officers now undergo training specifically to help those with mental illnesses, to de-escalate situations for the safety of all involved.

Officer Eric Mueller underwent crisis-intervention (CIV) training 12 years ago, while the program was still a volunteer-only training in Minnesota. For a full week, he studied at a school in Saint Paul to learn specific CIV tactics, including de-escalation methods, and studied different illnesses and conditions, learning how to talk with people and understand mental health-based situations.

“It’s as much a way of training as a different state of thinking,” Mueller said. “When you’re a police officer, you go in and you’re tasked with solving an immediate problem the best way you can, and often as quickly as possible. With crisis intervention, that has to change. You have to slow down. You’re dealing with a lot of unknown variables.”

Mueller is one of six officers in Winona who took the voluntary training, and has taught several classes for officers and local residents on crisis intervention. He explained that over the years, he has become close with people in the mental health community and learned a lot about how to interact with those in crisis.

“The thing I always emphasize with my students and fellow officers is slow down,” Mueller said. “When someone is in crisis, they are not even listening to you.”

Last year, a new Minnesota law went into effect that requires all 10,500 licensed peace officers in Minnesota to undergo 16 hours of CIV training, albeit a less-intensive version of the seminar created for yearly training. The move to mandated training for all officers loops in CIV training in the same vein as defensive and fire-arm training — every three years, officers have to complete the training to retain their license.

According to police chief Paul Bostrack, this is the first year that the mandated training has been put in effect, and over the next three years, all Winona officers will undergo the training as part of their licensing. For now, officers must be taught in the Twin Cities, but the city’s goal is to have an in-house trainer in the next several

years.

“It’s not only the person who is at risk of getting hurt, but the officer, as well,” Mueller explained.

The training comes at a crucial time for Minnesota officers, including those in Winona. According to data from the Winona Police Department, the number of emotional and behavioral incidents has been consistently on the rise — from 2014 to 2018, the number of calls nearly tripled from 57 to 163.

“The amount of people in some type of mental health crisis that law enforcement, EMS, paramedics deal with ... we have all seen a very significant increase in those kinds of calls, especially on the streets,” Bostrack said. Over the past 20 years or so, he added, the calls now come in four times as often.

Why the increase? According to Mueller, there are several factors. When the recession hit in 2007, many state-wide programs and funding for mental health care were cut, as costs continued to increase and the state’s resources were being spread thin.

“When they starting cutting back beds and cutting back funding for medications, alot of these people just fell through the cracks,” Mueller said.

Some choose to self-medicate, he explained, resulting in an increase of drug use among those suffering from a disability. For those with some illnesses, like bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, chemical abuse can make the symptoms even worse.

Mental illnesses are also just more common than ever, he added.

“One out of every four people have a mental illness sometime in their life. That’s pretty staggering,” Mueller said. “It’s alarming how many people are mentally ill, and they’re finding it more difficult to get what they need.”

Officers themselves can have difficulties with these situations, outside just having to think in a different way, Mueller added. For instance, when a pair of officers walks up to someone having a mental health crisis, the reaction is rarely one of comfort and stability.

“There’s always going to be a bit of fear, and we understand that. Officer presence can be really intimidating for people who are in mental crisis,” Mueller said. “They get so used to seeing a police officer when they are getting arrested or getting a ticket so when they are going into a crisis, it is very terrifying for them because their mind goes to ‘Did I do something wrong?’”

Because of this, CIV training is crucial for helping officers develop the skills to de-escalate situations and help those suffering with finding the help they need. Officer Anita Sobotta underwent CIV training in 2016, and explained that much of crisis

intervention involves focusing on what the individual needs. While some calls may take only five minutes, mental health calls can last an hour or more.

“You have to let them vent,” Sobotta said. “It’s a fragile thing. You have to have patience and give them your attention.”

Mueller explained that in most mental health incidents, there is a series of events that officers go through. The first, and most important, is determining whether the person is a risk to themselves or others. That may be anything from being physically violent, suicidal, or even something like not eating. If they are at risk, Mueller said, the next step is to take them to the emergency room, but the goal is to either avoid that entirely or get the individual to voluntarily come along.

“There are going to be future calls, and they are going to have bad days,” Mueller said. “You don’t just want to grab somebody and take them to the hospital. There’s a big difference between forcing someone and getting someone to come with me. If they go voluntarily, the next time in crisis, it’s much easier because they may be quicker to trust that you’re here to help.”

To do this, much of the interaction revolves around communication and conversation, facilitating dialogue and understanding how the individual is feeling and what they are suffering from.

“With a drunken kid, you’re giving them instruction and telling them what to do. With mental illness, you’re listening to figure out what they need and what you can do,” Sobotta explained.

While not all incidents can be de-escalated, Bostrack explained, training all officers in how to approach these incidents is crucial for keeping everyone involved safe and keeping things from getting out of control — especially if the incident is non-criminal.

“No call is the same. Every situation is different, so as an officer, there may be a counselor hat you’re wearing that day, or a parent hat you’re wearing that day,” Sobotta said. “It’s not necessarily a criminal matter that they’re dealing with.”

“We are not social workers, but that’s what we have to do at times,” Mueller added. “We truly are here to serve people, and we have to sometimes learn how to help different groups differently. Not everybody requires equal treatment — some people need a higher level of help.”

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