

Correction officer pleads guilty in Grand Island hit-and-run

By [Melinda Miller](#) | Published October 11, 2017 | Updated 3 hours ago

A New York State correction officer pleaded guilty Wednesday to leaving the scene of a serious personal injury accident in the case that left a Grand Island grandmother with a traumatic brain injury.

Edward J. Kuebler III, a correction officer at Wende Correctional Facility and a volunteer firefighter, was charged Aug. 30 with the felony, 2 1/2 months after Dana Papaj was hit while walking her dog on East River Road. Kuebler was [suspended without pay](#) from his job and it is expected that he will be fired now that he has pleaded guilty to a felony, as required under the Public Officers Law.

In accepting the plea, Erie County Judge Kenneth F. Case agreed to sentence Kuebler, 27, to no more than an indeterminate 1 to 3 years in state prison. The maximum sentence allowed for the Class E felony conviction is 1 1/3 to 4 years. Kuebler also could receive a one-year jail sentence or probation, but District Attorney John Flynn said his office will push for the judge's maximum.

"This family is devastated, and in my opinion this defendant deserves some jail time," Flynn said.

He added that Kuebler pleaded guilty to the highest possible charge.

Kuebler, who gave his address as Kinderhook Court in East Amherst, struck Papaj in the head with the passenger side mirror of his vehicle when he went off the road and onto a lawn at about 8 p.m. June 13. A homeowner's security camera captured much of the incident, Flynn said, including the vehicle's brake lights coming on briefly before it drove away.

The next day Kuebler's attorney called to turn in the vehicle.

"To be fair, I'll give him credit for that," Flynn said. "But we would have found him anyway."

The DA added that, had Kuebler stopped and called for help when Papaj was struck, he may have been charged with nothing more than a traffic offense – if he wasn't intoxicated. He said all indications were that the vehicle was going about 30 mph, within the speed limit.

But Kuebler didn't stop. It was neighbors who called for help.

"The fact that you leave the scene of an accident is immoral and unethical," Flynn said, not to mention the medical consequences for the person who was hit if the injuries are serious.

Papaj, 54, of Grand Island, was in a coma for a month after the June 13 accident and she remains a patient at Erie County Medical Center.

Several members of her family were in court to witness Kuebler's plea. They watched the proceeding stoically until the end, when there were indications that a December sentencing date had been discussed. Instead, the judge scheduled sentencing for Jan. 17.

The family was visibly upset, and when attorneys looked to them with concern, one family member remarked, "Yeah. Merry Christmas. Go ahead."

Papaj's son-in-law later explained that knowing Kuebler would be home through the New Year was particularly hard "while Dana being home remains uncertain."

Case also declined prosecutor Kelley A. Omel's request that he increase Kuebler's \$5,000 bail, but the judge agreed to reinforce an earlier Grand Island court order that Kuebler's license be suspended and he not be allowed to drive.