

Backlash follows Grand Island officer's removal from command over offensive texts

Buffalo News By [Stephen T. Watson](#)
Published August 4, 2019

Grand Island Supervisor Nathan McMurray's decision to remove the officer in charge of the town's police force – after learning of comments the officer is accused of making through a mobile messaging service – has stirred backlash on the island.

Christopher M. Soluri, 41, remains an officer in the part-time department as an investigation that could lead to his termination continues, and he's filed a legal challenge against the town in State Supreme Court.

McMurray declined to comment specifically on what led him to replace Soluri, who is also a town firefighter. But The Buffalo News has obtained copies of messages purportedly shared among high-ranking Grand Island firefighters through a private group text chat.

In one, Soluri apparently responds to a friend's message stating Soluri is "too Caucasian" to be where he's traveling by posting a photo of an African-American man missing many of his teeth, followed by the comment, "Dude I fit right in."

"We have no tolerance for racial discrimination whatsoever and, with the full extent of my power, I will work to prevent it from occurring and to hold those proven to do anything wrong accountable," McMurray said.

Soluri is an Erie County sheriff's deputy who was recognized for valor and a former Grand Island fire chief.

"In our opinion, this is a deliberately altered document that's being used by somebody with an ax to grind to impugn the fine reputation of a longtime public servant," said his attorney, Brian Doyle, a former Sheriff's Office administrator who has known Soluri for 20 years.

Friends and colleagues lauded Soluri's extensive service to island residents and vehemently insisted he's not racist.

"I ask you to consider the full and entire history of this man and whether his history of exceptional contribution to our community without incident earns him the benefit of a doubt," said Michael Madigan, a Town Board member and volunteer firefighter.

Grand Island does not have a police chief, so the officer in charge is the highest-ranking officer in the part-time department of about two dozen officers. The island also is served by sheriff's deputies and state police.

Buffalo News archives show that Soluri has been an officer with the Grand Island police since at least 2007 and the officer in charge since at least 2013.

Most of the officers, like Soluri, have full-time positions in other police agencies in the area.

He earned \$22,188 from the Town of Grand Island and \$94,395 as an sheriff's deputy in 2018, according to payroll records collected by SeeThroughNY. He also is a longtime firefighter who previously served as chief and deputy chief, among other positions.

Printed copies of the group chat have circulated widely on the island.

The messages aren't dated, but Doyle said the exchange took place Dec. 31, 2014. They're printouts of screenshots from a chat group named "GFD Chiefs Captains," and the name of every message sender except Soluri was blanked out.

The exchange begins when an unnamed firefighter announced some colleagues were spending New Year's Eve drinking wine at the fire company's headquarters and invited other people to join them and watch him perform a sexual act on a male firefighter.

Someone identified as Soluri in the screenshot responds with a map highlighting his current location. The printout is too faded to read the location, but Doyle said Soluri was in Detroit that night.

When an unidentified firefighter questions whether Soluri should be where he is because he's white, Soluri apparently posted the picture of an African American and the fitting-in comment. Another firefighter then wrote to say the comments and picture made him laugh uproariously, amplifying his message with a stereotypical African American slang word.

Doyle said the messages were doctored to make it seem like Soluri sent the final statement with the slang term.

"He admits there was an exchange," Soluri's attorney said. "He has no recollection that he posted that picture."

The copies of the message chain obtained by The News included a cover letter, addressed to firefighters, alleging the department was aware of the messages and did not take appropriate action to deal with them.

"Is this who you want to be led by?" the author asks. "Should this man be leading any department?"

Soluri is not named in the undated letter, which Doyle said was sent to department members in 2016. Soluri won election as fire chief after the messages were released and held the post as recently as early last year.

"This is a matter that was handled internally as a personnel matter," Gregory J. Butcher, vice chairman of the fire company's board of directors, said in an email. "By virtue of it being a personnel matter we are not at liberty to discuss it further."

McMurray has little to no control over the fire company's operations.

But the supervisor is the town's police commissioner and, as such, can appoint or remove the officer in charge.

McMurray received copies of the messages at his office several months ago, a source said, and he shared them with his fellow Town Board members.

The supervisor asked Town Attorney Peter Godfrey to conduct an investigation.

McMurray suspended Soluri initially before removing him from the department's top job, returning him to the rank of officer and replacing him with Robert Rine on an acting basis.

Soluri has filed a legal challenge known as an Article 78 against the town to protect his rights. The town is trying to reach a settlement with Soluri to resolve the standoff.

"As soon as we were made aware of these allegations, we took action," McMurray said, declining to say more.

Doyle said he has met with the town attorney to discuss the situation. He emphasized that Soluri hasn't been charged with anything and that there has been no finding of misconduct.

Madigan said he didn't know anything about the messages until he got copies of them at the same time the supervisor did.

Madigan said the Town Board isn't involved because McMurray is the town's sole police commissioner, but he believes Soluri deserves to remain as officer in charge and shouldn't be forced out of the department.

"If you see what he said on that chat there, he stated, 'I fit right in.' That's not racist. That's – I think he was trying to counter it," Madigan said. "He may have tried to be humorous. Maybe he didn't use great judgment. But one thing I know about Chris Soluri: He is not a racist. You won't find a racist bone in his body."

Bob Cleveland, a 30-year Grand Island firefighter, said he has not seen the messages but he's never heard Soluri say anything derogatory.

Cleveland is white, but he and his wife have fostered a diverse group of about 50 children over the years and they have adopted three African American boys, all of whom Soluri has treated with kindness.

"He always is and always has been welcome in my home and around my children," said Cleveland, who wrote a letter of support for Soluri to Town Board members.

Cleveland and Madigan both cited Soluri's decades serving island residents – and saving lives – as a police officer, sheriff's deputy and firefighter, and they said he has earned the respect of his peers.

Soluri was named [the deputy of the year](#) and received a state certificate of exceptional valor in 2013 [for his courage in successfully negotiating](#) with a suicidal man who confronted him with a large knife in an August 2012 encounter after Soluri had gotten the man's girlfriend and their baby out of their apartment.

A March Facebook post from the union that represents Erie County sheriff's deputies shows Soluri dropping off groceries at a residence on Grand Island. The caption states the deputy responded to the man's home for a welfare check and, when learning he had little food in his home, took him grocery shopping.

Soluri wasn't named in the union's post but a blogger recognized him and identified him by name in [her own post on his good deed](#).

"You'd be challenged on Grand Island to find one person who's given more of his time, effort, goodwill and everything else," Madigan said.
