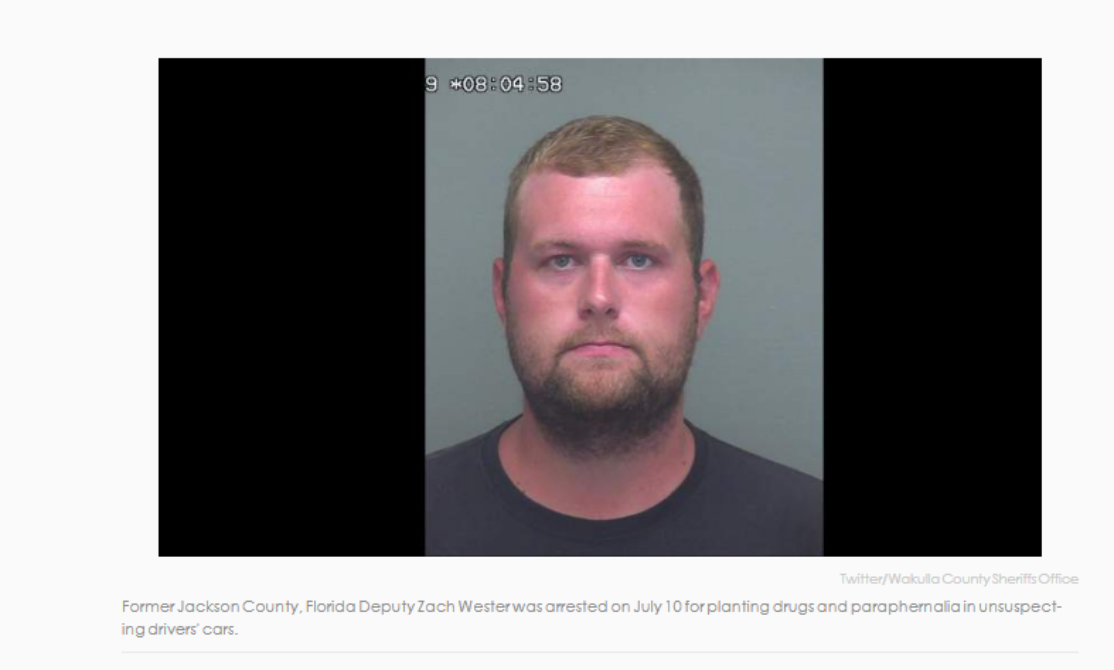
Zach Wester: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know

By Janet Winikoff | Heavy | Published Jul. 13, 2019 at 7:51 p.m. | Updated 8:10 p.m.



Former Jackson County, Florida Deputy Zach Wester was arrested on July 10 for planting drugs and paraphernalia in unsuspecting drivers' cars.

A Florida deputy has been charged with planting drugs and paraphernalia on drivers he pulled over, then arresting the innocent motorists. Jackson County Deputy Zachary “Zach” Wester, 26, was taken into custody on July 10. He faces 52 charges of racketeering, official misconduct, fabricating evidence, possession of a controlled substance and false imprisonment.

He is also charged with misdemeanor perjury, possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug paraphernalia.

Wester is also looking at misdemeanor charges of perjury, possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug paraphernalia. Three federal lawsuits have been filed against Wester involving nine plaintiffs. At least 37 people have filed lawsuits at the state level, according to TruthOut.org.

The former deputy has been with the department since 2016.

Wester was arrested in the city of Crawfordville, located in Wakulla County, and taken to the Wakulla County Jail, where he bonded out of jail after bail was set at $169,500. He refused to speak with investigators and has not offered a motive for his crimes.

If convicted of all of the charges under current guidelines, Wester could serve up to 13 ½ years in prison.

This is something we’re not proud of,” Jackson County Sheriff Lou Roberts told the Tallahassee Democrat. “No agency wants to go through this kind of situation and face the embarrassment of the public. This is a very serious matter. We’re supposed to set higher standards, and the allegations that were made in this case will be tried.”

“There’s no other evidence that any other deputy or other Jackson County personnel were involved with Mr. Wester,” Roberts stated, adding that the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) spent 1,400 hours

investigating Wester. The investigation is ongoing but Wester is not expected to face additional charges.

Here's what you need to know about Zach Wester and his recent arrest.

1. Wester Turned His Body Camera Off & On During Searches

According to the arrest affidavit, Wester would stop drivers for minor traffic violations, search and discover drugs in their cars, then place them under arrest. During the search, Wester would sometimes turn his body camera off and then turn it back on again, just as he would "discover" the drugs in the driver's vehicle.

In video made public of some of Wester's arrests, drivers can be seen standing on the street as Wester conducted his "search," which would typically turn up baggies of methamphetamine, marijuana or drug paraphernalia.

"There is no question that Wester's crimes were deliberate and that his actions put innocent people in jail," FDLE Special Agent Chris Williams said in a news release about the arrest.

2. A Vigilant Prosecutor Noticed Wester's "Disproportionate" Number of Drug Arrests

In May 2018, newly-hired Assistant State Attorney Christina Pumphrey noticed an unusually high number of drug arrests made by Wester. "This is an exaggeration, but it felt like his name was on half the cases," the now former DA Pumphrey told The Appeal. "It was seriously disproportionate."

She told WomenWhistleblowers.com that public defenders also spoke with Pumphrey about Wester's arrests. They would tell her that a lot of their clients were saying drugs were planted in their cars. They told Pumphrey to watch Wester's videos and compare them to his affidavits.

Pumphrey was troubled when she watched the body camera footage from Wester's arrests. The affidavits describing the evidence didn't match evidence shown on Wester's videos and she noticed his body camera was turned off, then on again once drugs were found.

Pumphrey also thought the drivers reacted unusually when faced with evidence Wester discovered in their vehicles. "It wasn't, 'OK, crap, I'm busted,'" she said. "It was, 'What do you mean?'

3. Pumphrey Was Told Not to Drop Wester's Cases

The son of a former Jackson County deputy and drug task force member, Wester was known for aggressively ticketing and arresting members of the public. He arrested more than 100 people during his two years with the Jackson County Sheriff's Office.

Even after spotting the inconsistencies between his arrest affidavits and body camera footage, Pumphrey said she was "getting an explicit instruction to not dismiss the cases."

"I know these people are sitting in jail. I know that the particular charges they're in jail on they're either innocent of, based on the information I see, or there's no way I could take this in front of a jury. But I'm being told, 'Just let them sit in jail,'" she said.

4. Pumphrey's Evidence Against Wester Led to an Internal Investigation

Pumphrey started looking at Wester's older cases. When she reviewed Wester's stop of motorist Teresa Odom for a faulty brake light and then arresting her for meth possession, she noticed something hidden in the deputy's hand. Pumphrey took her findings to a supervisor who in turn, shared them with the Jackson County

Sheriff's Office in July.

In August, Roberts asked the FDLE to open an investigation into Wester's possible misconduct. During the internal investigation, deputies discovered 42 drug paraphernalia items, 10 small bags of methamphetamine and five small bags of marijuana hidden in an unmarked and unsecured evidence bag in the trunk of his patrol car.

Wester's arrest affidavit noted that "The items located within Deputy Wester's patrol car were not maintained as required of legitimate evidence, items for safekeeping or items for destruction."

"The multiple items located were consistent with, and similar in appearance to, items believed to have been used to fabricate evidence during (his) traffic stops and arrests." The evidence was caught on an investigator's body camera.

Wester was suspended in August and fired the following month.

By late September 2018, 119 cases that had relied on Wester's testimony were dropped. There are 11 confirmed victims, but there may be more. His arrests typically involved working or economically-challenged individuals, many with a prior record. Wester may have specifically targeted these individuals since their testimony could be considered less credible than his.

Pumphrey recalled Chief Assistant State Attorney Larry Basford reprimanding her for taking the videos to the sheriff. "He starts yelling over the phone. What was I doing looking through all the videos? Why in the world did I find the Teresa Odom video? Why was I looking for it? And just having an absolute fit." Pumphrey said she resigned the following day and filed a lawsuit against the state attorney's office.

5. Wester Was Previously Investigated for Sexual Misconduct

The Tallahassee Democrat reported that Wester had previously worked for the Liberty County Sheriff's Office but left the agency after it was determined he had inappropriate relationships with multiple women, including a confidential informant arrested for methamphetamine. One deputy said Wester had an affair with his wife and then showed her nude photos to members of the department.

Another woman said she and Wester had a relationship after he arrested her for shoplifting. Her boyfriend called the department to lodge a complaint. A convenience store employee said she received unwanted advances from the married deputy when he flirted with her during a call.

"It's a small county. People talk. There was enough of it that it concerned me and I didn't want this guy around," Former Liberty County Sheriff Nick Finch said.

Finch said he told one of his captains to fire Wester but the captain allowed the disgraced deputy to resign instead. While Finch was upset that the captain had not fired Wester as instructed, he said he was just glad to see him go.

Finch revealed that he warned Jackson County's Sheriff Roberts about Wester, whose father had previously worked in that county as a deputy, but Roberts didn't heed his advice. "If I'm a betting man, I'm betting Lou wishes he hadn't hired him," Finch told the Tallahassee Democrat. "Hindsight is what it is."

Portfolio copy reconstructed from the archived Heavy article. Social-share modules, navigation, embedded social-media posts, links, and duplicate image captions have been omitted for readability. Article wording and terminology are preserved as supplied.