



Metro

State trooper under scrutiny didn't reveal drug-dealing past, but left clue in hiring process



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

State Trooper Leigha Genduso said she did not lie or mislead State Police by not giving details of her drug-selling past.

By [Shelley Murphy](#)

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Trooper Leigha Genduso admitted on her State Police application that she experimented with pot as a teenager, but never mentioned that she cut up bales of marijuana and sold it in 10-pound packages covered in gift-wrapping.

Still, a clue on Genduso's 2012 application could have exposed her past and raises questions about how thoroughly she was vetted during the hiring process.

A North Reading address that Genduso listed as her former residence was forfeited to the government in a federal drug case — a case in which Genduso took the witness stand in 2007 and recounted her role in a marijuana-trafficking operation.

"I had a background investigation like everybody else did," Genduso, 36, said last week in her first public comments since she was suspended without pay in February amid revelations about her past. "I answered the questions."

Genduso, who dated and lived with a top commander at the time she applied to be a trooper, is now at the center of an internal investigation into how she slipped through the hiring process.

"There's no way I would have ever allowed somebody to be hired with that type of background if I knew about it at that time," said former State Police Colonel Timothy Alben, who led the department from 2012 to 2015. "Clearly that was not brought to my attention."

Alben said State Police applicants have been turned away for far less than what Genduso admittedly did.

Genduso, who became a dispatcher in 2008 and a trooper in 2014, said no one asked during the hiring process about her federal testimony, which was given under a grant of immunity. A transcript of her testimony has been available on the court docket since 2008, and State Police assisted the Drug Enforcement Administration during that investigation.

State Police applicants are asked if they ever used or sold drugs. Genduso wrote that she “experimented” with marijuana in 1999, then “terminated” use, according to her 2012 trooper application.

Defending that response in her interview with the Globe, Genduso said she gave “a vague answer” to “a large open-ended question” and didn’t believe she lied or misled State Police by failing to disclose her past. She said she elaborated on her answer during a follow-up interview with a background investigator, but doesn’t recall being asked if she sold drugs.

Her attorney, Vikas Dhar, who shared Genduso’s personnel file with the Globe, said the information she provided on her applications “would trigger or should have triggered follow-up questions and to the extent the State Police failed to do that is on them.”

He said he expects Genduso to be reinstated.

On Monday, officials announced sweeping changes for the State Police. Updates to background checks for new recruits will include questions about whether they were involved in a criminal investigation, even if they were not charged with a crime. Officials said the department is also exploring other methods to identify “potential red flags among candidates.”

State Police spokesman David Procopio said the internal investigation into Genduso’s hiring is ongoing.

“In addition to investigating the information she provided during her hiring process, we also are examining whether other steps could have been taken in an attempt to learn more about her background,” Procopio said.

State Police background checks involve reviews of criminal, driving, and credit histories; written questionnaires; assessment of past employment; and interviews of people who know, or know of, the applicant, according to Procopio.

Applicants who admit to past recreational use of marijuana — which is now legal in Massachusetts — are reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

“Factors that are considered are frequency and duration of use, applicant’s age at the time, and context in which it was used,” Procopio said.

Genduso also shared on her 2012 trooper application that she had been living with Daniel Risteen, then a State Police major, for three years. Risteen was later promoted to lieutenant colonel, third in command of the agency, but retired suddenly in late February, the same day Genduso was suspended.

Risteen had been accused last fall of taking part in the decision to order a trooper to remove embarrassing information from the report about the arrest of a judge’s daughter.

Genduso said she and Risteen broke up in October. She declined to comment on whether he knew about her past, but said neither he nor anyone else at the State Police intervened in the hiring process. “There was no indication to me that I was getting any special treatment at all,” Genduso said.

Risteen could not be reached for comment. His lawyer did not respond to requests from the Globe.

Alben, who now runs a security consulting business, said Massachusetts is one of the few states that doesn’t allow law enforcement agencies to require applicants to take polygraph examinations, and that an exemption should be created under the law to allow that.

“I don’t want the public to think everybody gets through,” Alben said. “Clearly there’s an issue with this one. We need to go back and fix what the deficiency was because what we know now would be disqualifying information for being hired, no matter how she wants to minimize that.”

Robert Long, a retired State Police detective lieutenant and security consultant, said any background check should include calls to the police departments in the towns where an applicant lived to determine whether there were any interactions with them.

“There are very convincing liars out there,” Long said. “I go into every background check very cynical.”

Genduso said she doesn't understand why she's facing harsh criticism for misdeeds she committed before joining the force.

Her personnel file shows she received numerous commendations as a dispatcher and canine officer — from guiding police to rescue a kidnapped woman to using her dog to track home-invasion suspects and uncover drugs and cash.

“I feel like I'm being hung out to dry because of mistakes in my past,” Genduso said. “Nobody's perfect, and basically everyone messes up.”

Genduso said she had a tough childhood and left home at 16. Three years later, she was waitressing when she began dating Sean Bucci, a disc jockey and drug dealer.

In 2007, while testifying in federal court in Boston, Genduso revealed that she had helped Bucci break up bales of marijuana and launder money and that she delivered up to 10 pounds of marijuana at a time to her own customer. Her testimony helped send Bucci to prison for 10 years for marijuana trafficking.

On her application for trooper, Genduso listed 23 Marshall St. in North Reading as her home address from 2002 to 2004. That home was bought by Bucci with drug proceeds and forfeited to the government after his 2007 conviction, according to court filings and a press release issued at the time by the US attorney's office.

Genduso said she turned her life around after breaking up with Bucci in 2004, began volunteering with rescue dogs, and thought she might be able to pursue a career in law enforcement, since she had no criminal record.

“I wanted to start over,” said Genduso, adding that she applied three times for dispatcher jobs before getting hired.

But Alben said law enforcement is not a job for anyone who was involved in drug trafficking and money laundering.

“I think people turning their lives around is a very honorable and noble thing to do, and I give credit to anybody who has done that,” Alben said. “But they don’t belong in law enforcement, because integrity means everything here.”

Shelley Murphy can be reached at shelley.murphy@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@shelleymurph](https://twitter.com/shelleymurph).

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