



OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF POLICE

PRESS RELEASE

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ATHENS POLICE OFFICER EXPERIENCES ILLNESS FROM DRUG EXPOSURE

ATHENS, TENNESSEE – January 21, 2020 – On January 19, 2020, at about 10pm, Officer Zack Hawkins of the Athens Police Department noticed a suspicious vehicle at Heritage Park with a man and woman inside. As he approached the vehicle, he smelled marijuana coming from inside. Two additional officers responded to the area and stood by with the couple (identified as Akeem Vaughn and Velvet Hill) while Officer Hawkins used his drug detecting canine partner, Danya, to walk around the perimeter of the vehicle. After Danya detected the smell of illegal substances in the vehicle, Officer Hawkins began searching it.

A search of the vehicle yielded several different items and illegal drugs.

As he completed the search, Officer Hawkins advised that he felt ill. An ambulance was summoned, but dispatchers advised that it would take ten minutes to reach them. Since Officer Hawkins' conditions were getting worse, one of the officers on scene used his patrol car to rush him to the hospital.

Officer Hawkins was treated at the hospital for much of the night and released early the next morning. Mr. Vaughn and Mrs. Hill were both arrested and charged with: T.C.A. 39-17-418 Possession of Schedule II (Ecstasy), T.C.A. 39-14-418 Possession of Schedule VI (Marijuana) and T.C.A. 39-17-425 Unlawful Possession of Drug Paraphernalia.

The Police Department is still attempting to determine exactly what the officer was exposed to and how he was exposed, as he was following all appropriate procedures and wearing appropriate protective equipment during the search. He is already back at work.

Chief Couch, of the Athens Police Department, said "This is a chilling reminder of how dangerous this job can be, even when an officer does everything right. These officers leave their families and come to work every day, not knowing for sure what will happen. The young men and women who defend this community have my thanks and admiration."

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