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HEADLINE: Former city policeman guilty of misconduct; Eastern District officer was suspected as dealer's 'enforcer'

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BODY:

A former Baltimore police officer was suspected of being an "enforcer" for a drug dealer and admitted listening to a murder plot that he did nothing to stop or report, a prosecutor said in court yesterday.

The allegations against Andre Johnson, a former Eastern District patrolman who was found guilty yesterday of misconduct in office, are among the most serious in a string of charges against city police.

Johnson, 23, told police "he did nothing to report this murder was going to take place, did nothing to stop it, did nothing to report it after it took place," said Assistant State's Attorney Elizabeth A. Ritter.

Johnson also falsified a police report to help a drug dealer with whom he'd grown up, Ritter said, assigning it a fake number and a fake officer's name in return for a payment of \$ 200.

Johnson entered an Alford plea, in which he did not admit guilt but acknowledged he could be found guilty at trial. Under the plea agreement, he is to be sentenced to no more than four years in prison when he comes before Judge Mabel E. H. Hubbard April 1; his attorney can argue for less time.

With his plea yesterday, Johnson became the latest in a stream of city officers to become entangled with the criminal world they are supposed to combat.

Former Officer Erick McCrary, who was on Johnson's squad in the Eastern District, pleaded guilty last year and was sentenced to 21 months for helping a drug dealer beat a gun charge. McCrary was indicted last month for conspiring to kill a rival of that dealer. If convicted, he could face the death penalty.

Despite Johnson's statement to police about the killing last year of Courtney Williams, 27, of Ellicott City -- whom Ritter described as a drug dealer said to make \$ 30,000 a week -- no one has been charged in that death. An investigation by city police and federal agents remains open, police spokesman Sam Ringgold said yesterday.

Ringgold praised the police work that led to Johnson's conviction, saying: "It is clearly intended to send a message that this is not going to be tolerated. For the 3,000-plus officers who do an incredible job every day, they are disgusted by it."

Johnson was arrested in May, about a month after Williams' body was found floating in the Gwynns Falls near Leakin Park April 7. Williams' arrest record included charges of murder and drug possession that were dropped.

Initially, police discussed only Johnson's connection to the falsified police report. But a statement of facts Ritter gave in court yesterday indicated the officer's involvement in the case was deeper.

Ritter told Hubbard that police began to suspect Johnson was corrupt two months before Williams' body was found, when Johnson, in plainclothes, walked into a Northwest Baltimore apartment police were searching. That apartment, Ritter said, was the home of Christopher Black, Courtney Williams' brother.

Johnson, who was carrying handcuffs and a gun, was accompanied by Thomas "Archie" Smith, whom Ritter described as a lieutenant for Williams' drug business. When Johnson saw the police at the apartment, he tried to back away. But a police sergeant searching the apartment asked Johnson to stay and learned he was a police officer, the prosecutor said.

That sergeant then wrote a memo to the Police Department's internal investigations division, saying that based on the encounter, he suspected Johnson was an "enforcer of some kind" for Smith, Ritter said.

A few days later, police found Williams' 1995 Nissan Quest van abandoned in the 4500 block of Old Frederick Road in West Baltimore. It was sent to Howard County police for processing, because Williams had been reported missing to that department.

In the glove compartment, police found a police report and statement of charges, indicating that Smith had been arrested for drug possession. But Ritter said Johnson later told investigators that neither the sequence number for the report nor the name of the officer was real. In fact, Smith had paid Johnson to falsify the documents to make it appear that Smith had been arrested with the drugs, so that a supplier would think police had confiscated them. Detectives found Smith's and Johnson's fingerprints on the documents.

Court records show that Smith, of the 3800 block of Reisterstown Road, was arrested in May on a charge of illegally possessing a pistol, but the charge was dropped. Neither Smith nor Black could be reached for comment yesterday.

After Williams' body was found, detectives interviewed Johnson, who told them he had overheard Smith and Black plan the slaying, Ritter said. "Courtney Williams was making \$ 30,000 a week, and they were tired of it," Ritter said Johnson told police.

After the killing, Johnson told detectives, Smith paged Johnson "and told him Christopher had done it," Ritter said.

Johnson remains free on \$ 10,000 bail pending sentencing.

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