

CITY OF SIERRA VISTA
POLICE PENSION BOARD MEETING
August 13, 2021

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Gregory Johnson called the regular meeting of the City of Sierra Vista Police Pension Board to order on August 13, 2021 at 2:19 p.m., in the City Manager Conference Room, City Hall, 1011 N. Coronado Drive, Sierra Vista, Arizona.

ROLL CALL

MEMBERS PRESENT: Councilperson Gregory Johnson, Chairman
Gary L. Smith, Board Member
Barbara L. Fleming, Secretary
Jessica Ferrel, Police Officer
Jordan Boltinghouse, Police Corporal

MEMBERS ABSENT: None

OTHERS PRESENT: Shanna Melanson, Human Resources Analyst
Stephen Coleman, Local Board Council (via WebEx)
Peter J. Van Wesep, Applicant (via phone)

ACCEPTANCE OF THE AGENDA

Gary L. Smith motioned that the agenda be accepted as written.

Jordan Boltinghouse seconded the motion.

VOTE: Unanimous.

The motion carried.

NEW BUSINESS

1. Review of Physical Examinations

Secretary Barbara L. Fleming advised the board that the physical examination pre-existing report for Daniel Molina needs to be acknowledged.

Jessica Ferrel motioned that Daniel Molina's Pre-Existing Condition Report dated June 17, 2021 with no pre-existing condition be acknowledged effective August 13, 2021.

Gary L. Smith seconded the motion.

VOTE: Unanimous.

The motion carried.

2. Continuation of the Application for Accidental Disability Retirement – Peter J. Van Wesep.

Secretary Barbara L. Fleming advised the Board that Peter J. Van Wesep has worked for the City of Sierra Vista as a Firefighter for eight years and as a Police Offer for almost six years and applied for an accidental disability retirement which the Board continued at a previous meeting. On July 22, 2021 Mr. Van Wesep requested that the Board hold another meeting.

At 2:22 p.m. the Board entered Executive Session

At 3:09 p.m. the Board exited Executive Session.

At 3:09 p.m. Ms. Fleming got Mr. Wesep on the phone. The conversation went as follows:

Mr. VanWesep: Hello, this is Pete.

Chairman Johnson: Yes, hi Mr. Wesep. This is Gregory Johnson and we're in the Police Pension Board meeting, as we speak, and we are going over your claim for disability and we do have some questions for you. We have Gary Smith, Jordan Boltinghouse, Jessica Ferrell, Barb Fleming, and Shanna Melanson present. How are you doing today?

Mr. VanWesep: Well, I've had a pretty rough week. Not the best week for my mental health, but thank you so much for asking. And I really appreciate you allowing me to join this meeting by phone.

Chairman Johnson: Okay, now I understand that you've moved from the area, is that true?

Mr. VanWesep: Yes, I have. Under the advice of my doctor, my therapist, things I've read, we thought that a change of environment would do me well. There's too many triggers, there's too many memories, there's too many things. I can't even go to Walmart, you know. I can't even, I get confused at intersections. I can't drive past City Hall. I have a hard time being in a car at all. So, we thought that a change of environment would help. My wife had always wanted to move to Georgia. She was able to get a job as a travel nurse. So, that's what we're doing right now. We're renting a house and we're trying to make ends meet and we're going to see how this goes.

Chairman Johnson: Okay, yeah, travelers, they get to see the world and make some pretty good money at the same time. I have a question for you. From the medical reports that you've sent to us, I see that basically you've stopped all treatment after your visit with, let's see that was with Dr. Arellano, on July 1st. Have you continued to seek treatment elsewhere?

Mr. VanWesep: Well, there's a couple problems with that. Number 1 is I lost my insurance. So, it is extremely expensive. I am continuing to take my medications and once my wife's insurance kicks into place here in about 60 days, then absolutely, I have to go back to treatment. I can be in contact by phone with my therapist, Nancy Williams. However, she also let me know that she's

not getting paid. So, just added stressors right now are that I don't have the money to pay my medical bills. I don't have the money to pay for my medications. So, I'm really in a tough spot. Again, it's just trying to hold it together.

Chairman Johnson: Okay.

Mr. VanWesep: But, I absolutely have to continue treatment. This is something that I'm going to be, I hate to be a negative person but, what I've gone through in the last couple years, year and a half, this is something that I'm going to have to deal with for a very long time. Yeah. We just have to get settled in the new area. I've already looked into some family practices that are here in McDonough. It's just I don't have the resources right now to pay for it because I don't have any insurance.

Chairman Johnson: Okay, alright. Some other members of the board have some questions for you as well. So, I'll turn it over to whoever wants to jump in here first.

Mr. VanWesep: Okay, absolutely.

Mr. Smith: Pete, this is Gary Smith. Did you have any kind of opening statement or any other comments, generally, you just would like to make to the board today?

Mr. VanWesep: Yeah, Gary. I'm not familiar with you. I'm sorry, I know you've probably never met me either. But, I don't know who you are.

Mr. Smith: Okay. I'm just a board member, retired law enforcement.

Mr. VanWesep: Okay, alright sir. Thank you very much. I didn't have anything planned, but just to, because I don't know how this goes. The way my mind is working or not working right now, it's really hard for me to put things together. This mental illness is severe. I'll give you kind of an example of that this week. It was my daughter's birthday on, I'm almost crying already and I'm sorry about that, but, that's just the way my emotions are. My daughter turned 13 years old on Sunday and we took her to an aquarium and the way that my anxiety is and my PTSD is that we were in the aquarium and having a good time and, I got so overwhelmed with the noise and the lights and the people, I just kind of had to sit out, I couldn't drive home. And then, this whole week, I've slept most of the week. I can't put two and two together. I guess the reason why I'm saying this is that my daughter's upset because she thought that this is going to help dad, it's going to help him get better, and he's going to be back to normal, and it wasn't. And then, the whole, you know, I get started again with those suicidal ideations and how am I going to get this noise to stop, and how I'm going to.... and the reason I'm saying this is that's what my life is like right now. You know, it's not, it's not nice. And it's not easy. So, I guess that's all I have to say about that.

Mr. Smith: Okay, thanks Pete. I'm sorry you're going through all that. When did you start experiencing the PTSD symptoms?

Mr. VanWesep: Well, I'm no expert at PTSD. I know a lot more about it now than I did in the past. But, when I went over to the school as the SRO, I started having problems with my emotions, with listening to the radio. I would hear hot tones or I'd hear officers, like asking for

backup, and I could hear it in their voice; they're having distress. Of course, I also listen to all the fire stuff because I'm a paramedic and I know what those guys are doing and I know what they're going through and I know their trying to stabilize. And I would just cry. I couldn't handle it. I would shake, I would cry and, I just thought, you know, oh I'm getting emotional and maybe I need to take a break or.... I went and talked to my pastor. Maybe I'm over tired, exercise more, I was riding my bike more. So, that's really when it started. Just I started losing control of my emotions.

Ms. Fleming: Pete, what was the approximate date that you went over and became the School Resource Officer?

Mr. VanWesep: Oh gosh, I was trying to think. I'm so confused on the years right now and the COVID and all that stuff. My son is home, by the way now, with COVID at his first week at a new school and he's got the COVID stuff. It was 20, 2019, I think. It was a four-year assignment and it was towards the end of that year, towards the end of the summer. I had been off the, or towards the start of the summer, I'd been off the street for a while. I love the kids, I love the, even though, they're pain in the butt you know, but I was having a good time but it was shortly before I was going to come back on the street that I started having those emotional breakdowns.

Mr. Smith: Now Pete, did you, did you go over any of those breakdowns or feelings with a supervisor before you came back? How did you handle it?

Mr. VanWesep: No, just my wife really. My wife and I, we've been married for, well in October it will be 21 years. And, you know, I've always been a very caring person. I've always been a very emotional person. A big heart. You know, people would joke with me and say that gosh, I don't know if you're a good fit for a cop because you like people too much and I just thought it was me being a dad, and me being compassionate, and me having all these emotions. So, it wasn't taking me out of the game but, to me, it wasn't really normal. I didn't really know what to do about it. I know that one time Officer Ferrell, we ran into each other in the hall, and she had asked me "Hey, how's it going? Do you like the school? Do you like the, do you miss Fire and stuff?" I had told her, I said that I'm getting really emotional. It's hard for me to handle the trauma, if there's a, you know, a car accident or this is actually after I went back out on the street after being at the school a year, it's hard to see people injured; it's hard to work those codes. So, I guess, in a roundabout way, I did share that a little bit. But, you know, I'm a, I'm a fixer, I'm a doer. I'm human. I'm allowed to have emotions and, you know, you just keep on going through your day. You got to be strong for people.

Mr. Smith: Sure. So, you never brought any of this up with any supervisors or the departmental chaplain or anyone like that?

Mr. VanWesep: I did. I spoke to David Cairns (department chaplain). I told him that I was having some problems. He directed me to a co-pastor of his, Matthew Statler, who specializes in things like PTSD and stuff. And, I hadn't even identified it really as PTSD yet because I didn't have like the anger and rage and the, you know, the TV image of what PTSD was. I wasn't the shell shocked, the bang, and the, you know, you lose your mind. Mine was more emotional and mine was more, when it quickly decompensated. Because you compensate for it for a while, for whatever reason and then, when it decompensated and got really bad, that's when I went to David. That's when I mentioned to Jeremy Wolfe "hey I can't be on the street." He said, "no

problem". I went to, or actually Nick Lamay, who was a supervisor that day. He asked me if I was okay, he's like "you don't look good". He sent me home. My co-workers were noticing. I went and spoke to the chaplain. He gave me some things to do through the Bible and the Book of Psalms and working with God and trying to work through the problems. He also recommended the physical fitness of it, just to get the stress out. And, it hadn't really like reared its ugly head yet. I was still able to go day-to-day. So, quite frankly, it's not one of those things that you want to bring up. That stigma in the police department, it's just not one of those things. So, you're looked at as being weak, you're looked at as being emotional, you're looked at as being a wimp. You know, just tough it out. And, I just took it upon myself. Right or wrong. I tried to get through it the best that I could.

Mr. Smith: Sure. Uh, Pete, have you ever filed an industrial injury claim on any of this stuff?

Mr. VanWesep: No, I haven't.

Mr. Smith: Why?

Mr. VanWesep: I didn't know that was something I was supposed to do.

Mr. Smith: Okay.

Mr. VanWesep: It's a first I've heard of it.

Mr. Smith: Okay, Pete, that's the only questions I have right now. Thank you.

Mr. Boltinghouse: Pete, this is Jordan Boltinghouse. One of the questions I have is what are you presently doing, or what have you done since resigning from the City of Sierra Vista?

Mr. VanWesep: I've just been trying to get myself well. Jordan, quite frankly, it's an everyday battle. One of the things, with all the pressure thoughts and things, I've, there's not much that I do other than be at home. I'm thankful everyday for my children, my family, the breath in my lungs that I'm still alive because, quite frankly, before I went to Commander Hiser and I confided in him and I told him that I was suicidal and I told him that I was homicidal and I told him that I was having all these issues and, I went and really started getting into the medical help. There's not much I can do right now. It's hard for me to drive. On my good days, I might, you know, go to the store or something but, if it's too loud, or too noisy, I've left full shopping carts full of groceries because I've just got to get out of the store. I might pick up my kids from school. Like I said, my son is home right now. My abilities to do things with my, this is really started to affect my somatic nervous system that I've got to figure out whether it's the medications or something else, but I have severe tremors. That's one of the things I've had for a while. The firearms staff had noticed that. You can ask Brian Sebastian when I was going through this stuff. But, they've gotten a lot worse. Reading, writing, some days I can't even spell my own name or write my own name. I'm very confused. I get lost at intersections, even when in town. I'm not trying to paint this horrible picture, but most days, that's my life. Most days, I, if I go drop my daughter off at school, if I can drive that day, I come home and I go to bed until I pick her up. The pressure in my brain is so much, from these bad days that there's not much that I can do. I haven't looked for a job. I've just been going to the doctor, taking my medications, I try to exercise a little bit, but I can't as much as I could because with some of the medications, you have to stay out of the heat. You

got to hydrate. So, I've had some issues with that. I've put on a ton of weight. My self esteem is so low right now. I'm just trying to go day-by-day. I turn 48 next week, next week Monday. I have no job, I have no insurance. I can't provide for my family. I've got two kids, you know. You know all I wanted to do was just still help people and still work. And, and I can't. I hope to again someday. But, there's nothing I can do right now other than try to, my therapist, my doctor said if you got to sleep, then sleep. You know, it's like if you have a cancer, you know, if you just can't do it that day, then you just can't do it. And, I have a lot of days where I just can't do it. So, I know I sound like a lazy weakling but, I mean that's, that's all it is.

Mr. Boltinghouse: No, I just know you had some involvement in the community outside of your employment with the City. I believe you were teaching some EMT courses at the college and had some involvement with mountain biking. I was just more curious...

Mr. VanWesep: Yeah.

Mr. Boltinghouse: If you were able to get back into something like that or, during this time, if this interfered or with those duties at all.

Mr. VanWesep: The, um, I'd love to get back on my bike again but with my coordination and the way that the medications and stuff affect my metabolism, I run out of calories really quick and its hot, its humid and, I'd have to drive to these trails. I'm very unstable on my feet and with my hands. I was working with the mountain bike team at Tombstone where my, where my son went to school and I love that. That was part of, hopefully part of my treatment, where I was, you know, just being with young people and exercising and being outdoors. And before I went on medications and before I really decompensated to where I am right now I would love to do those things. Right now, I've got some big hurdles. You know, I know I've got to get outside and I know I've got to try to do more things. Right now, Jordan, right now I'm just leaning on God day-to-day just to give me the strength and to keep going forward. So...

Mr. Boltinghouse: Just a side question to those, when did you stop teaching at the college or having interactions with that mountain bike team?

Mr. VanWesep: I stopped at the end of the season with the team, so that would have been in November of, when the season was, November of... When did COVID all start? I'm sorry I can't remember. Um.....

Chairman Johnson: Basically, March of 2020.

Mr. VanWesep: It was at the end of, I stopped having involvement with the mountain bike team the end of, it was either 2019 or 2020. So, and then the college was, I taught at the college EMT and Paramedicine for 8 years and that was from when I started full time with the City in 2007, so that would be to 2015 when I started, when I went to the police academy.

Mr. Boltinghouse: Okay.

Mr. VanWesep: I've had no involvement with the college since then.

Mr. Boltinghouse: Okay. Thank you, Pete.

Ms. Ferrel: Hi Pete, it's Jessica Ferrell. And I apologize, I don't recall that conversation that we had in the hallway. Can you try to help me remember that? By giving me the time frame?

Mr. VanWesep: Yeah, it was. Sure, it was brief. I'm not going to be able to tell you the time frame. It was brief though, passing in the hall by the, the whiteboard there, I forget what you call it, where the shifts are and stuff, the shift notes and things. It was just in passing, it was probably a 2 or 3 minute conversation. So...

Ms. Ferrel: And was that shortly before you left or are we going back like a couple years?

Mr. VanWesep: No, we're going back probably a year.

Ms. Ferrel: Okay.

Mr. VanWesep: When I first, yeah when I first started having those emotional problems. And again, it wasn't every day, it wasn't like I was falling apart every day. When it got really bad, over the last... before I resigned, I would show up for briefing and I would head out, I would be crying in my car. You know, I couldn't, I wasn't paying attention to the radio, I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings, I wasn't taking calls. You know, I'm like I can stop all this noise right now. You know, I've got, I've got guns right here. I can take care of myself right now. And, I hate to say that, it's embarrassing to say that, but that's how bad it was and I get lost. I'd avoid intersections. It just, it's so overwhelming. I can't even describe it to you guys and I don't even really fully understand it myself, coming from a person who's highly skilled, highly capable, highly reliable to just where I am right now. And, I know I'm going to get better, I have to get better. But, I can't do the same things that I did before.

Ms. Ferrel: No, I know you mentioned a couple people at the police department that you said came up to you asking you how you're feeling. Is there is anyone that you confided in about what was going on that you can tell us specifically?

Mr. VanWesep: Chris Hiser was the only person that I really let know what was going on.

Ms. Ferrel: Okay, and was that shortly before you left or after you left?

Mr. VanWesep: That was, that was shortly before I left. So, I went, I had a really bad night where, you know this is, you think about mental health and you're able to compensate for things and when you're not sick you're able to, you know, your chemicals are working right and you're able to work through things, you're able to do healthy things, like your diet and your exercise and you're having your support group, your family, getting away from work, taking vacations. Those are all things I tried. I went to Ohio with Matt Quinn and we hunted and I had said to him, I said I'm having a lot of problems at work and this was over a, we were in his kitchen in Ohio, and it was after a conversation that his dad had had with me and his dad had said that he used to listen to the radio before the radios went digital and he used to be able to listen to Matt in Ohio and, some of the situations that his son was in, it made him very nervous and concerned for Matt. And, I was crying, you know. I just felt so emotionally distraught for his dad and for Matt and so I had mentioned it to Matt. But, you know, you're still able to kind of hold things together and once, once the bottom drops out, it's just, you know, you're not, you're not thinking straight, you're not

sleeping. Everything on the roadway to me looks like a dead body. You know, it's a bag of trash, but you know, I've seen so many dead bodies laying in the road. Nightmares. I would, I'd have night terrors and my wife would try to wake me or soothe me and there were times when I would like almost break her arm; I would like fight her. And, the dissociation part of it, an officer would call for back up, and you know I'd show up, and I wouldn't even be there; I couldn't pay attention. Josh Humphrey, he's got a stop, he's looking for drugs in the car. I'm supposed to be watching the person, and I'm not even paying attention. You know, and that's what's so scary about it. He could've been killed, could've been hurt. Anybody could've been killed or hurt. Something could've gone really wrong. And the worse it got, the more I couldn't get all of that hurt and pain and struggle out of my mind, I just thought, you know, that the only way to get away from this, to stop this, I'm going to blow my head off. I went to my safe, I got my shotgun, loaded it. I was heading outside and my son, he came out of his room, and he said "Hey dad, can you help me with this? What are you doing with a gun?" I said, "Oh uh, mom said there was a snake outside." You know, I was fully headed to do this because I couldn't make it stop. It hurts so bad. And, I didn't obviously that night. The next day I went and saw Chris and I said I can't, I can't do this right now. He told me okay, take the day, call me tomorrow. I called him, I said there was no way that I can pay attention at work. It's not safe for me to be at work. So, he totally supported that. He let all the supervisors know in a roundabout way, you know, that I was having some health problems and, just kind of keep it under wraps. So, that's where we went from there. And then, Chris recommended that I go to Human Resources and talk to them about, God I can't think of what it is, the FMLA and the short-term disability. So, that's the route that I took from there.

Ms. Ferrel: Okay. And, kind of leading into that, I know you were offered some in-patient treatment over, I believe it was, Boulder Crest.

Mr. VanWesep: Yeah.

Ms. Ferrel: Okay.

Mr. VanWesep: Yeah, Chris had offered, he called me and he said "Hey, I've got this great, this great opportunity. We can get you in over at Boulder Crest and it's the first time the City has been able to do that." I talked to my doctor and my therapist about it. My doctor, actually, advised against it. He said you've got your support group in place at that time. My wife, my kids, my therapist, my medications. He said a place like Boulder Crest is for someone who has no other resources. They bring you there, they isolate you, they put your phones away so you can't contact your family. That to me, just sounded like boot camp. I appreciate the offer and that's why I talked to my doctor about it and he said "No, you don't need to go to that." He's like I've got you, I'm going to take care of you. He specializes in PTSD things; he's had it himself. He comes from the military and, so yeah....

Ms. Ferrel: Which doctor is this?

Mr. VanWesep: Dr. Arellano.

Ms. Ferrel: Okay. I think that's all that I have. Thanks, Pete.

Ms. Fleming: So, we've got your stuff that you have submitted, the records from the medical doctors at Copper Valley or rather Copper Queen and then, also from your licensed clinical social worker. Have you sought any other treatments from any other mental health professionals?

Mr. VanWesep: No, I haven't.

Ms. Fleming: No others. So, not previously or at any other time?

Mr. VanWesep: No, ma'am.

Ms. Fleming: Have you been diagnosed with bipolar?

Mr. VanWesep: No, I have not. That's one thing that, if you do the, believe me, I've had time to do it, if you look into different, different avenues that this complex PTSD can go down and I didn't even know there was a thing called complex PTSD, but that's what I have and that can open up a lot of different mental illnesses, like bipolar; they can mimic bipolar. And of course, along with a lot of PTSD, you know, the evil little depression and anxiety you know, and that goes along with it. So, my medications that I take, I take an anti-psychotic, I take lithium for the bipolar, I take a fluoxetine for my depression, and then, Xanax for the anxiety. I'm a person who never took medications before. I just prided myself and I didn't need medications. I was super healthy. I always exercised. I'm a two-time iron-man triathlete. I've, you know, I've always been healthy and this has been such a, such a blow, such a setback. So, no other, no other health history other than this.

Ms. Fleming: Okay. So, let me just clarify here, you said you have never been diagnosed with bipolar?

Mr. VanWesep: No, that's one of the things that the doctors and the therapists are now looking at but I have never been diagnosed with bipolar previously.

Ms. Fleming: Okay. That's all the questions that I have for you, I think. Let me go back through my notes here.

Mr. VanWesep: Okay.

Chairman Johnson: Alright, Pete, this is Greg Johnson, the Chair again. I've got a follow-up to my initial questions when we first started this. I appreciate this lengthy questioning, but you know, there were just so many things we wanted to cover. I'm looking at your report from your very last visit with Dr. Arellano and that was July 1st, 2021. And, the chief complaint was follow-up medication lithium times one month, patient says depression is gone. Suicidal ideation is gone. He has trouble sleeping and slight hand tremors but he has more energy. He notes, he still has PTSD symptoms but his mood has improved, other than anxiety. How do you feel that reflects your feelings today?

Mr. VanWesep: That was a good week. That was a very good week and I was very encouraged. Because, for the first time in months, I hadn't had those suicidal ideations. I was having fun with life. I don't know what had changed, whether it was the medication, but the lithium, it takes, it takes 3 or 4 weeks to work. So, I don't know what changed that week. I'm not this way every day.

You know, I have good days and I have bad days. The bad days outweigh the good. So, I don't know. Those are his notes. That's why I told him on that day that I felt better that day.

Chairman Johnson: Okay, alright. Are you still taking the lithium?

Mr. VanWesep: Yes, sir. I am.

Chairman Johnson: Okay. Anyone else have any further questions? I see shaking of heads. Mr. Van Wesep, I appreciate all your time today. We are going to follow-up with a letter with some other questions that we may have forgotten or neglected to ask and, we'll be in further touch with you. Do we have your current address in Georgia?

Mr. VanWesep: Currently, I'm renting a house so I don't have anywhere that I'm receiving mail. You can still send it to the post office box in Hereford and they're forwarding it to Georgia for general delivery until we get our, if we find a permanent residence. So....

Chairman Johnson: Okay, we can do that. We can do that.

Mr. VanWesep: Yeah, if you send it to the post office box, then it'll get to me. The best way really though is probably by email. I check it when I can. And, the mail would just be really unreliable. It would take probably two weeks to get here.

Chairman Johnson: Okay, and we have your current email address?

Mr. VanWesep: Yes, sir.

Chairman Johnson: Okay. Alright, well, with nothing further we will end this call and we will follow-up with a letter to you probably in the next week or so. We will send it both via email and regular snail mail, okay?

Mr. VanWesep: Okay, thank you.

Chairman Johnson: Thank you and get better okay?

Mr. VanWesep: Thank you, sir.

Chairman Johnson: Thank you.

Chairman Johnson asked "Well, Steve, any thoughts"? Mr. Coleman stated the Board should probably go back into Executive Session if they wanted to talk about legal issues. He said he would be happy to do that or they could make a motion for the Secretary to draft the questions that they discussed in the prior Executive Session.

At 3:45 p.m. the Board entered Executive Session

At 4:08 p.m. the Board exited Executive Session.

Jordan Boltinghouse made a motion that the Board table the request based on the fact that they are still lacking some information and documentation and that a letter be drafted (for Mr. Van Wesep) asking those specific questions as discussed by the Board.

Chairman Johnson seconded the motion.

VOTE: Unanimous.

The motion carried.

CALL TO THE PUBLIC

None

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Board, Chairman Gregory Johnson adjourned the meeting at 4:09 p.m.

Barbara L. Fleming, Secretary