



CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Douglas County DA dismisses 40 cases because of police officer credibility concerns

Officer not charged for falsifying report

BY: **FRANK ZUFALL** - NOVEMBER 22, 2024 5:45 AM



📹 Officer Jarid Rankila tells Erica Peters she is being detained | Screenshot via Superior Police Department body cam footage

Douglas County District Attorney Mark Fruehauf said he had “serious concerns” about the credibility of a Superior, Wisconsin police officer who has served as a witness in criminal cases. The concerns stem from discrepancies between the officer’s incident report and body camera footage documenting an April 13, 2024 arrest. As a result, the DA dismissed 40 cases, including 26 involving felony drug charges, where the officer served as a witness.

The concerns were raised after Officer Jarid Rankila, 26, a three-year veteran of the force, reported that a woman he arrested had injured him, kicking the door of a police car so that it closed on his hand. Body camera footage reveals Rankila saying “You almost smashed my hand in the f...ing door.” The footage also shows him using the hand he said had been “smashed” without any apparent difficulty.

On Aug. 26, Fruehauf wrote Superior Police Chief Paul Winterscheidt about his “concerns that I have regarding the

CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROJECT

📹 The Wisconsin Examiner's Criminal Justice Reporting Project shines a light on incarceration, law enforcement and criminal justice issues with support from the Public Welfare Foundation

credibility of Officer Jarid Rankila, relative to the above-listed incident and the claim made therein by Officer Rankila about a hand injury he sustained during the incident.”

Chief Winterscheidt told the Examiner that Rankila had resigned from his job and that his last day on the force was Sept. 30.

Reports

In the incident report Rankila prepared, he noted that he was called at 9:10 p.m., April 13 to the Superior Curling Club, 4700 Tower Avenue, (local media refers to this area as the Superior Fairgrounds) where a woman was “flipping over tables, yelling at people and causing a disturbance.”

The woman, Erica Peters, 40, of Appleton, was there to watch her son compete in a cage fight.

Rankila recorded that he and two other officers arrived on the scene and that Peters appeared intoxicated and was becoming aggressive with one of the other officers. Rankila attempted to handcuff Peters but, he reported, she resisted until, with the assistance of the other two officers, he was able to handcuff her and attempt to secure her in squad car 32.

“I walked to squad car 32 to open the rear driver’s side door for Officer’s Olson and Finger. When I did this Erica turned toward the rear driver’s side door of the squad car and kicked it shut. My right hand was in between the door and the b-pillar of the squad car at the time Erica kicked it out.

“When Erica kicked the door shut on my right hand, I felt a rush of pain in my right hand...”

Arrest clip



In his report, Rankila stated that he stopped at the Essentia Health Emergency Room in Superior to “speak with a ER doctor about the incident and weather (sic) I should have my hand (sic) examined. At that time, which was approximately 30-40 minutes after my hand was slammed in the door, I was no longer feeling pain in my right hand. My hand was tighter than normal and I noticed it was slightly swollen.

“The ER doctor listened to my recollection of the incident. He advised that I be mindful of any pain or range of motion issues with my affected hand in the coming days and weeks. The doctor stated it would not be necessary to check me into the ER for an official check-up as he would end up telling me the exact same thing and then release me.”

Peters was booked on three charges: disorderly conduct, resisting or obstructing an officer and battery to a law enforcement officer. Only the battery charge is a felony. Peters was ultimately charged only for disorderly conduct and resisting or obstructing an officer. She pled no contest to the disorderly conduct charge and the other charge was dismissed.

Fruehauf notes that on April 16 Rankila filed “a supplemental narrative report of the incident” in which Rankila reports: “I would rate my level of pain to be 8/10 (eight out of 10) when the door closed on my hand. I noticed swelling and stiffness in my hand and fingers for approximately 30 minutes following the incident.”

And Fruehauf also notes that on April 18, Rankila completed an “Employee Injury/Illness Report Form” in which he reported that the injury included “abrasion, bruise and pain,” and stated “I opened the door to the squad car and she kicked it closed on my hand,” and he described “severe pain in my right hand, swelling and light bruising.”

Fruehauf said a review of the reports Rankila filed without reference to any other evidence “would lead a reasonable reader (and did, in fact, lead me personally) to conclude that Officer Rankila had a car door forcibly closed or slammed shut on his hand and he suffered an injury that was evidenced by pain, swelling, bruising, and abrasions (which is what one would expect to see following a person’s hand being slammed in a car door).”

Body camera



Still from bodycam video | photo courtesy Douglas County DA

“Officer Rankila’s body camera was recording during this incident. It is not consistent with his police reports,” said Fruehauf.

The Douglas County DA described what he saw in the footage of the reported door slamming on Rankila’s hand.

“Officer Rankila’s hand is on the side of the open door, with his fingers on

the outside, and the base of his palm resting on the inside of the door. He is essentially gripping the door as it is open.

“Peters, without warning aggressively and forcefully kicks the door while Officer Rankila is holding on to it. In a frame-by-frame review of the body camera footage, it appears as though Officer Rankila is able to quickly remove his hand just before the door closes on it. It certainly does not close on his fingers. At worst, if it closed on any part of his, it would have been the base of his palm.”

Close inspection of the body camera footage the Wisconsin Examiner received from the police department does not clearly show Rankila’s hand on the squad door.



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August 26, 2024

TO: Chief of Police Paul Winterscheidt
FROM: District Attorney Mark Fruehauf
RE: Officer Jarid Rankila and incident 24SP05033

Chief Winterscheidt,

The purpose of this letter is to reduce to writing the concerns that I have regarding the credibility of Officer Jarid Rankila, relative to the above-listed incident and the claim made therein by Officer Rankila about injury he sustained during the incident. While I believe you are aware of the background, I will begin outlining in this letter the fact pattern at issue, starting with a review of his written reports in isolation without consideration of any other evidence (such as video evidence).

Officer Rankila's written reports

On April 13, 2024, several officers, including Officer Rankila, responded to the Superior Fairgrounds where they ultimately detained a female, Erica Peters, who had been disorderly.

According to Officer Rankila's report, the following incident transpired as officers approached a squad car:

I walked to squad car 32 to open the rear drivers side door for Officer's Olson and Finger. When I did, I turned towards the rear drivers side door of the squad car and kicked it shut. My right hand was in between the door and the b-pillar of the squad car at the time Erica kicked it shut.

When Erica kicked the door shut on my right hand, I felt a rush of pain in my right hand. I did not continue to let Erica to kick the squad door shut on my hand and it caused me pain.

I pulled my hand out and attempted to help secure Erica. Due to the pain in my hand I had to walk away for a moment.

Officer Rankila then describes speaking to Peters' husband, taking Peters to jail, and ultimately booking her on three charges – Disorderly Conduct, Resisting or Obstructing an Officer, and Battery to Law Enforcement.

Fruehauf provided the Examiner with a series of still images taken from the video that, he said, show Rankila's hand on the door prior, during and after the door is kicked. However, the still images are not very clear.



Still from bodycam video | photo courtesy Douglas County DA

In the report, Fruehauf noted that Rankila shouts, “Hey! Knock if off. You almost smashed my hand in the f-ing door!”

Fruehauf also pointed to video showing Rankila reenacting his hand being slammed in the door and saying, “I was holding the door open and she kicked it shut so hard that my hand went ‘boom!’”

“At this point, his entire hand is inside the vehicle such that the reenactment depicts the door appearing to close on his wrist,” said Fruehauf, adding, “This is not consistent with the actual incident as depicted on his body camera.”

Fruehauf noted other footage shows Rankila using his right hand without any apparent difficulty and also that there had not been a photo taken of Rankila’s hand to document the injury.

In his incident report, Rankila did not provide the name of the doctor who reportedly looked at his hand, but an Ashland County investigator had spoken with an ER doctor on duty that night, “who said he had a vague recollection of talking with a police officer in person or on the phone.”



Still from bodycam video | photo courtesy Douglas County DA

GPS data on Rankila’s squad car, Fruehauf said, located it at Essentia Hospital on the night of the incident for 2 minutes and 21 seconds.

Analysis

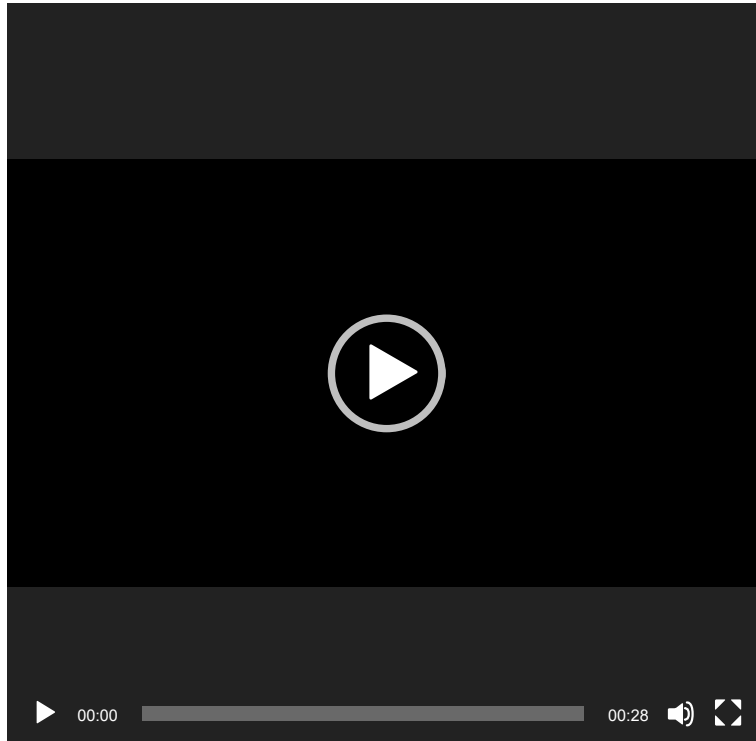
“Based on my review of the above information, I do not find credible the report of Officer Rankila wherein he says on April 13, 2024 his hand was slammed or smashed in a car door, resulting in injuries to include bruising, abrasions and swelling,” wrote Fruehauf.

Fruehauf raised concerns about several areas of Rankila’s report including the visit to the hospital where Fruehauf questioned how Rankila would have had enough time in less than 3 minutes to walk into the emergency room and consult a doctor, as well as the fact that he did not get the name of the physician.

“Assuming Officer Rankila did not suffer the hand injury he describes, it is also disconcerting that any falsehood would not be limited to his initial report, but was in fact repeated twice more in the two subsequent reports he wrote days later documenting said injury,” wrote Fruehauf.

Fruehauf said that prior to the reported kick, Peters had not done anything that would warrant a felony charge and that night she would have been allowed to post bail and not spend the night in jail. Because Rankila charged her with a felony, Peters wasn't allowed to leave pending a hearing before a judge.

"Officer Rankila had every right to be upset," wrote Fruehauf. "He had every right to bring her to jail and book her on the misdemeanor offenses she had committed. But he did not have the right to include false information in a police report that ultimately supported Peters being booked in on a felony and having to sit in custody longer than she likely would have had she been booked solely for misdemeanor behavior."



Fruehauf also raised concerns about using Rankila to prosecute other cases.

"I have significant concerns about my office's ability ever again to use Officer Rankila as a witness. Absent additional information that sheds light or somehow serves to explain that this is some kind of innocent mistake, I cannot in good conscience permit a case to rest on the credibility of an officer with this kind of apparent dishonesty," he wrote.

Fruehauf said the Superior Police Department has an internal investigation underway and he requested the department provide him any "information that tends to either inculcate, or exonerate, Officer Rankila."

He added that he has begun "dismissing cases with prejudice that rely primarily on Officer Rankila's credibility and would require him to testify at a motion hearing or jury trial under oath."

Charges against Rankila?

Fruehauf was asked why he hadn't filed a charge against Rankila for intentionally falsifying a police report.

“A person is presumed innocent unless and until he is proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law,” he said. “Based upon my discussion of the case with Ashland County and my review of the evidence, at this time I do not believe I could prove beyond a reasonable doubt that a crime was committed by Mr. Rankila. Were charges to proceed against Mr. Rankila, I would be required to prove ‘intentional falsification’ beyond a reasonable doubt at his trial, and I believe a reasonable jury, which would be instructed that it must give Mr. Rankila the benefit of every reasonable doubt, could conclude that this was not a case of intentional falsification, but rather unintentionally very poorly worded reports.”

“At the same time,” Fruehauf said, “whether poorly written or something worse, this incident caused me serious concerns about my office’s ability to rely on Mr. Rankila’s credibility in future cases where he would be needed as a witness. As a result, we have made the decision to dismiss pending cases where he would be a necessary witness in the future, which has resulted in dismissal of 40 such cases, primarily involving drug and traffic related offenses.”

“This was a difficult decision that results in several charged defendants who will not have their day in court,” Fruehauf added. “But the job of the prosecutor is to do justice, and given the credibility concerns I have, I believe dismissal of those cases is necessary and in the interests of justice.”

Dismissed cases

The Wisconsin Examiner requested a list of the dismissed cases, which Fruehauf provided.

Of the 40 cases, 26 involved a felony related to a drug charge, including “methamphetamine with intent to deliver” and “cocaine with intent to deliver.”

Other felony charges dismissed included possession of firearm by a felon, bail jumping and fleeing an officer

Misdemeanors dismissed included financial card fraud and neglect of a child.

There is also one criminal traffic violation for operating while intoxicated (OWI) and three charges for operating without a license.



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Frank Zufall is a veteran reporter who has covered general news, features, government, education and other topics and has won several Wisconsin Newspaper Association awards. He is a fellow with the Examiner's Criminal Justice Reporting Project, with support from the Public Welfare Foundation.

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