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Pima County sheriff misrepresented discipline history in sworn testimony

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Arizona Republic

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Key Points

- Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos denied under oath that he had ever been suspended as a law enforcement officer.
- Public records show Nanos was suspended eight times while working for the El Paso Police Department.
- Nanos resigned from the El Paso department in 1982 in lieu of termination for issues including insubordination.
- The sheriff's sworn testimony came during a deposition for a lawsuit filed against him by a sergeant in his department.

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Three months ago, under oath in a Tucson conference room, Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos was asked if he had ever been suspended as a law enforcement officer.

Nanos said "no," according to a deposition transcript reviewed by The Arizona Republic.

That statement is at odds with the sheriff's record.

Nanos was suspended eight separate times as a young police officer in Texas, according to employment records from the El Paso Police Department.

The deposition came to light after The Republic uncovered new details about his departure from the El Paso Police Department in 1982.

Nanos resigned instead of being terminated from the El Paso department after several disciplinary issues, including excessive force, a shot fired and off-duty gambling, records show.

The sheriff, a Democrat in his second elected term, has brushed off questions about his employment history by saying the incidents happened decades ago. However, Nanos was asked about his past as recently as December, the transcript shows, and he misrepresented his work history.

Nanos, under heightened scrutiny as the search for missing 84-year-old Nancy Guthrie continues, declined to answer questions about the deposition.

"Ignore her," he wrote in an email to The Republic.

Two minutes later, he sent another message.

"We never speak to cases under litigation," Nanos wrote.

Nanos discussed his disciplinary record Dec. 11 while offering sworn testimony in a deposition. The deposition was part of the sheriff's legal battle with Sgt. Aaron Cross, an outspoken Nanos critic and the president of the Pima County Sheriff's Deputy Organization.

Cross is suing Nanos over an incident stemming from the sheriff's 2024 reelection bid. He shared a partial deposition transcript with The Republic.

A deposition is sworn, out-of-court testimony. Knowingly and intentionally making a false statement in a deposition can be considered perjury under federal law.

What did the sheriff say about his work history in the deposition?

Cross' lawyer, Steve Serbalik, began the Dec. 11 deposition by discussing ground rules with Nanos. From there, the conversation turned to the sheriff's career and disciplinary history.

"Have you ever received discipline as a law enforcement officer?" Serbalik asked, according to the transcript.

Nanos said "yes" and explained that he's "not a very good driver."

"So I had a lot of car accidents so, you know, letter for this or documented verbal for that."

Serbalik continued his line of questioning.

"Did you ever receive a discipline that rose to the level of suspension?" Serbalik asked.

Nanos answered simply: "No."

The deposition happened at the office of Tucson law firm Bossé Rollman PC, which represents Nanos. The sheriff's lawyer, Kevin Kristick, was present. David Stone, executive director of the Arizona Conference of Police and Sheriffs, was also there, the transcript shows.

Suspensions and leaves without pay in El Paso

Despite Nanos' sworn testimony, public records show he was suspended more than a half-dozen times from 1977 to 1982. He was placed on leave without pay three other times.

His first suspension from El Paso police came on July 3, 1979, a one-day punishment for a shot fired. Less than a week later, on July 9, 1979, Nanos was suspended again for off-duty gambling.

Nanos faced a 10-day suspension in May 1980 for a violation of rules and regulations, according to an internal affairs card the department used to document his discipline. He was suspended for four days in 1981 and faced two suspensions for "habitual tardiness" in 1982.

Nanos' longest suspension came in March 1982. He was suspended for 15 days without pay for excessive force after he was accused of injuring a robbery suspect during an arrest.

The suspect, Carlos Urias, claimed Nanos kicked him and struck him in the head. The incident landed Urias in the intensive care unit of the hospital, and he filed police assault charges against Nanos.

A grand jury declined to indict Nanos, according to news reports at the time.

In August 1982, Nanos resigned instead of termination. His supervisors listed "insubordination" and "consistent inefficiency" as reasons for the departure.

Nanos was suspended or put on leave without pay for a cumulative 37 days during his time in the El Paso department, according to a Republic review of employment documents.

Department amends Nanos' public résumé

Nanos has not said much about his work history in El Paso. He initially declined to answer The Republic's questions.

"That's your 'urgent' request? You sure you don't want to go back to my high school and ask why I got swats from the principal? Good luck with your hit piece," Nanos wrote in a March 9 email to The Republic.

The next day, the Pima County Sheriff's Department announced that it had amended his public résumé after The Arizona Republic found the document misrepresented his departure from El Paso police by saying he left the department in 1984.

Nanos also gave a friendly interview about The Republic's reporting to Tucson television station KVOA. Nanos said in the March 10 segment he's proud of his colorful past, which included wrecking five patrol cars.

"It's what shaped me throughout my career — not just the experiences I had then, but growing up through all of it. In 40 years here in Pima County, I don't think I've had any discipline," Nanos said.

Nanos' résumé states that he took a job as a corrections officer with the Pima County Sheriff's Department in 1984, though he said in the deposition that he started the job in the fall of 1983.

"That was fall of '83, yeah, and then started as a corrections officer. And then about the, I think, summer or fall of '84, I transferred over to deputy," he said in the deposition.

Nanos worked his way up the Sheriff's Department ranks for decades. When former Democratic Sheriff Clarence Dupnik retired in 2015, the Pima County Board of Supervisors appointed Nanos to replace him as interim sheriff.

Nanos lost his first sheriff bid in 2016. He ran again and won in 2020. He was narrowly reelected in a bitter 2024 race.

Nanos' sworn deposition came in ongoing lawsuit

Cross filed a lawsuit against Nanos after the sheriff placed him on administrative leave in the final weeks of the 2024 election. Nanos had accused Cross of campaigning for his opponent, Heather Lappin, while wearing a department uniform.

Although the legal battle is ongoing, the sergeant said he felt compelled to release part of the deposition to the public. He is also supporting an effort to recall Nanos, according to a Facebook post.

According to Cross, Nanos has not contacted Cross or Serbalik to amend his deposition.

"I think that that is something that the citizens of Pima County should be aware of," Cross said in a telephone interview. "That their chief law enforcement officer is

being untruthful when giving sworn testimony. Because he's counted on in providing truthful information to the public on a fairly frequent basis."

Stephanie Murray covers national politics and the Trump administration for The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. She also co-hosts "The Gaggle," The Republic's weekly politics podcast. Reach her via email at stephanie.murray@usatodayco.com and on social media @stephanie_murr.