

Borenstein: County hired social worker with domestic violence history

Contra Costa County official: “We don’t consider it relevant what’s going on in their personal lives”

By **DANIEL BORENSTEIN** | dborenstein@bayareanewsgroup.com |
PUBLISHED: March 16, 2017 at 9:00 am | UPDATED: March 16, 2017 at 10:33 am

A Contra Costa child protective services worker has her own history of domestic violence and participated in an infamous “Dirty DUI” scheme to entrap her ex-husband for drunken driving.

Suzanne Porter was under a civil [domestic violence restraining order](#) when the county hired her in November 2014 as a social worker. She has since been promoted twice and the responsibilities in her current [job description](#) include handling domestic violence cases.

ADVERTISING

The Contra Costa Employment and Human Services Department was not aware of the restraining order against Porter when they hired her, said Director Kathy Gallagher.

That’s because, no matter how sensitive the position, the department only does background checks for criminal convictions. “We don’t consider it relevant what’s going on in their personal lives,” Gallagher said.



Contra Costa Supervisors Candace Andersen, center, and John Gioia, right

Supervisors John Gioia of Richmond and Candace Andersen of Danville say that needs to change. “There needs to be a reassessment of how far we go in a background check,”

Andersen said. “If someone has a restraining order against them, to me that is relevant in a sensitive position such as child protective services.”

Ironically, while Porter’s bosses didn’t know about her history, county attorneys did. Her ex-husband, Hasan Arda Aksu, had [sued her, her father and the county](#) for civil rights violations stemming from the entrapment scheme, which involved a corrupt sheriff’s deputy.

The [county eventually paid \\$260,000](#) to settle its portion of the case. Porter and her father, Terrence Thompson, settled their part of the lawsuit [for undisclosed terms](#).

Private investigator [Christopher Butler](#) and former county [Sheriff’s Deputy Stephen Tanabe](#) went to prison for their roles in the DUI scam. Butler said he attempted similar schemes about a dozen times to entrap men who were embroiled in child custody battles. Porter was one of his clients. According to [court testimony of Carl Marino](#), an actor who participated in the scheme and turned police informant, Porter was a major player in two meetings at which the plan to ensnare Aksu was concocted.

Marino (who now plays Lt. Joe Kenda in the *Homicide Hunter* television series) posed as a magazine journalist who wanted to write an article about Aksu, a Verizon software executive. With an accomplice, Marino plied Aksu with alcohol at a Danville wine bar in early 2011. When Aksu left, Tanabe was alerted to arrest him as he drove away.

[Porter testified](#) in her domestic violence case that she had seen Butler on TV and contacted him because she was concerned her ex-husband was drinking and then driving with their child. Before then, she admitted, she had never raised drinking as a concern during the couple’s contentious custody battle.

Porter claimed she only participated in the first planning meeting, not the second, and didn’t know that her father had paid Butler. She said she was surprised to later learn from her father that the sting had been carried out.

The judge didn’t believe her accounts. Porter’s hiring of Butler was the final of four incidents Contra Costa Superior Court Judge Charles Burch cited after a three-day trial as he issued a three-year domestic violence restraining order against her.

Burch ruled that Porter’s participation in the sting to gain “a significant tactical advantage in her ongoing child custody conflicts” violated a temporary restraining order that was already in effect.

Aksu, the judge ruled, “should not have to fear that the limited contact permitted by the TRO might include an undercover plot to get him arrested.”

Porter and Aksu had married in 2002, separated four years later and divorced in 2008. Their post-marriage contact, revolving around custody of their son, was contentious, [according to Judge Burch’s 20-page ruling](#).

In June 2009, Porter showed up at Aksu's house to pick up their son an hour before the agreed-upon time. When Aksu said they were in the middle of dinner and asked that she come back later, an argument ensued. The judge concluded that Porter was the aggressor, that she pushed herself into the house and hit Aksu in the head with a shoe.

A month later, Porter drove to Aksu's house to drop off their son. Another argument ensued in which Porter grabbed Aksu's glasses and broke them, and grabbed and tore his shirt.

As Aksu tried to retrieve his glasses from her car, she started to drive away with him inside, refusing his requests to stop. Aksu managed to put the car in park and jumped from the car. Aksu sustained injuries to his face and shoulder. The judge ruled that Porter initiated the altercation and that Aksu did not attempt to fight back.

As a Martinez police officer arrested Porter that night, she asked, and was told, the extent of Aksu's injuries, according to [the police report](#). "If I knew I was going to be arrested I should have done worse," Porter is quoted as saying. She was never criminally charged. After those incidents, Aksu and Porter agreed to a mutual restraining order requiring them to stay at least 100 yards away from each other and each other's residences.

But in October 2010, a prowler was seen by a neighbor jumping the fence next to Aksu's house. Porter was stopped a short time later by police.

She matched the neighbor's description of the prowler and had fresh injuries to her hand and vegetation in her hair that the judge concluded was consistent with her vaulting the fence.

Citing the two physical altercations, the prowler incident and Porter's participation in the Dirty DUI sting, Judge Burch ruled that Porter had "engaged in multiple acts of abuse that lasted over a period of time" and issued the three-year restraining order.

The story of the Dirty DUIs, [first reported by Diablo magazine in 2011](#), was widely reported in Bay Area media over the next three years as Butler, Tanabe and [others involved in the stings and drug sales](#) faced trial.

Porter was mentioned [in a 2013 article](#) in this newspaper when her ex-husband testified against Tanabe. The three-year domestic violence restraining order was issued in Contra Costa County in 2012. The civil rights lawsuit against the county and Porter was filed in 2012 and was still pending when the county hired her.

Nevertheless, Contra Costa hired Porter as a social worker in 2014. Gallagher, the director of the county Employment and Human Services Department, said she didn't know how many, if any, other county social workers have been the subject of domestic violence orders.

Supervisor Gioia is concerned. The county needs to develop background check policies for hiring workers “in sensitive positions such as child protective services, foster care and pre-school teachers,” he said. “We must take every step to ensure the protection and best interests of children.”