

Arrest of Fresno police Deputy Chief Keith Foster shocks city leaders

By Pablo Lopez and George Hostetter



Fresno Police Deputy Chief Keith Foster, left, stands by Chief Jerry Dyer's side at a 2012 news conference announcing that the department had cracked a major marijuana ring. Foster and Dyer have been friends for decades. Foster's office is close to Dyer's at police headquarters. Reacting to Thursday's news that Foster had been arrested on federal drug charges, Dyer said, "This also has a tremendous personal impact on me. ... I've considered him (Foster) to be a friend," adding that he is going to pray for the Foster family during this difficult time.

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As the highest-ranking black law enforcement officer in Fresno, Deputy Chief Keith Foster was seen as a pillar of the community, looked up to by fellow officers, city officials and civic leaders. When news of his arrest on federal drug charges emerged, it sent shock waves throughout the city.

Foster is [accused by federal investigators of participating in a drug-trafficking ring](#) that included two family members and involved oxycodone, heroin and marijuana. He is on paid administrative leave while the Fresno Police Department conducts an internal investigation. As deputy chief, he is just below Police Chief Jerry Dyer and is paid nearly \$161,000.

The 51-year-old Fresnan has worked in the Fresno Police Department for decades, his career marked by promotions to higher-ranking, more prominent jobs as he stayed connected with the Fresno community he grew up in.

The son of Mississippi sharecroppers, Foster was one of 11 children of parents Irwin Foster, who became a nurse, and mother Annie Hughes. His older brother was Mac “The Knife” Foster, who rose to No. 1 heavyweight contender in 1970 when Americans still ruled boxing and Fresno was a hotbed for the sport.

Mac Foster died from congestive heart failure in July 2010. He was 68. “Mac inspired me. He was my role model,” Keith Foster said at the time.

He was among eight black officers who went to the State Center Peace Officers Academy in the mid-1980s — a stepping stone to landing a job with the Fresno Police Department. At the time, the police force was nearly an all-white outfit.

“For those who understand that we need more blacks in this particular profession, I get positive feedback,” he said. “I look at becoming a police officer as an escape from the current standards of the black community.”

Once in the police ranks, he started in patrol, then went to narcotics investigation. His boss was Sgt. Jerry Dyer.

In August 1996, Foster, then a sergeant, was shot and wounded during a raid at a drug house in southwest Fresno. He was one of five officers who were attempting to serve a search warrant. He suffered two wounds in the upper body and abdomen and spent several hours at Valley Medical Center.

Tragedy struck the Foster family in 2002 when police shot and killed his nephew, Eric Daniel Foster, 25. Police said Eric Foster was struggling with a police dog when he “apparently made a movement that caused the officer to believe that his life was threatened.” It was determined later that Foster wasn’t carrying a gun.

At the time, Keith Foster was one of the highest-ranking blacks in the department and was assigned as administrative assistant to Dyer.

Keith Foster kept his distance from the investigation and declined to talk publicly about his nephew’s death. But his close friend Dyer expressed his condolences. “It’s a difficult time for (Foster). It’s a difficult time for me,” Dyer said.

In 2005, Foster was promoted to captain and put in charge of the Management Support Bureau, where he was responsible for hiring and training police personnel. He also was northwest policing commander.

Two years later, Dyer promoted Foster to deputy chief, putting him in command of the Police Department’s support division, which includes records, video policing and graffiti eradication efforts. In March 2013 he became commander of the patrol division, overseeing the city’s four districts.

Shock, sadness

When the news surfaced that one of the city’s top lawmen had been arrested, Foster’s friends and community leaders shared a common response — shock and sadness.

“God almighty,” Fresno attorney Eric Green said. “This totally blows me away.”

Green, a former Fresno County prosecutor, said he has known Foster for more than 30 years. Their friendship led Foster to call Green when his younger brother, Patrick Foster, got in trouble. In 2012, Patrick Foster, then a Madera County correctional officer, was charged in Fresno County Superior Court with lying to police about being a carjacking victim after police arrested him for a burglary at Kohl’s department store in Sierra Vista Mall.

Patrick Foster later pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor, Green said.

Keith Foster is “a good cop, a good guy,” Green said. “What prompted him to do this?”

Mayor Ashley Swearingin attended the annual state of downtown event on Thursday evening, then briefly addressed Foster’s arrest.

"I'm shocked," Swearingin said. "I can't find the words to respond to something I never would have expected."

The buck of responsibility for the police department's operations stops at Swearingin's desk. It remains to be seen whether she plans to publicly demand an explanation for how a police department that constantly trumpets its unrelenting fight against the scourge of drug dealers could have a deputy chief arrested for just such a crime — and be blindsided by things, as well.

"What I've observed about the Fresno Police Department over the last six years is there have been a lot of shocks in terms of budget cuts and other things that have been very difficult to overcome," Swearingin said. "That department has not missed a beat. I give great credit to the chief and to his leadership team.

"I mean that broadly. They have raised up a team of people that knows how to fill in when there's a gap. I have every confidence that the department will continue to function. We have a host of talented, up-and-coming leaders in the department thanks to the chief. I don't have those concerns. I am very concerned about the situation in general. I'm concerned for everybody involved."

Council President Oliver Baines said he is saddened by news of Foster's arrest.

"At this time my thoughts and prayers are with his family," Baines said. "I am withholding comment until more information comes forth."

City Manager Bruce Rudd said he is "saddened" and "disturbed" by Foster's arrest and the serious nature of the charges. Rudd said he's known Foster on both professional and personal levels for a long time.

"It's sad to think someone you've known through many years could be charged with what Keith has been charged with," Rudd said.

Rudd also expressed sympathy for Dyer, saying the chief has worked hard since becoming Fresno's top cop in 2001 to build and sustain public trust in the department.

Rudd said he has "unwavering confidence in our chief."

Fresno City Council Member Lee Brand said he was "totally shocked."

"I could not conceive of him doing something of a criminal nature; he would be one of the guys if Chief (Jerry) Dyer stepped down, he would be a serious candidate to be chief," Brand said.

Brand said he's at a loss to explain how criminal activity might have happened at the highest levels of the police department.

"He's an outstanding police officer," Brand said. "I just hope that there is a mistake in this or that there is some explanation."

Fresno City Council Member Clint Olivier knew Foster when Olivier was a member of the news media and learned more about Foster after he was elected to the council.

"He is very involved in the community and he's always been very serious about police work," Olivier said. "Deputy Chief Foster is a pillar of our community ... I'm shocked and saddened by the allegations."

Clergy in southwest Fresno said Foster's arrest was shocking as well as a blow to the community.

"We're sorry to hear of his arrest," said the Rev. Lewis T. Booker II of Rising Star Baptist Church. "We look forward to hearing more details about the circumstances. We have always admired Keith for the accomplishment that he's made in the Fresno Police Department."

Foster's rise in the department "is a huge accomplishment for anyone, but especially for someone from the African American community here in Fresno."

The Rev. D.J. Criner, pastor at Saint Rest Baptist Church, said Foster was a leader in Fresno and a prominent figure in west Fresno. News of his arrest "cuts the community in west Fresno, because that's one of ours," he said.

Criner said Foster was supportive of Night Walks, an effort since 2012 to spread peace, stop violence and create opportunities in southwest Fresno by talking and praying with residents. He considers Foster a friend. "He's innocent until proven guilty. We pray our justice system does exactly what our justice system was set up to do. We support our justice system on this."

But the person who might have been most shaken by Foster's arrest was Dyer. The two have been friends for decades. Foster's office is close to Dyer's at police headquarters.

"This also has a tremendous personal impact on me. ... I've considered him (Foster) to be a friend," Dyer said, adding that he is going to pray for the Foster family during this difficult time.

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