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## Status quo for Lee police chief tied to holiday fund that is under investigation

By Dick Lindsay, Berkshire Eagle Staff  
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LEE -- Leading town officials said Wednesday they don't plan any immediate action against Lee Police Chief Joseph L. Buffis following confirmation that federal authorities are investigating a holiday fund managed by Buffis for more than 30 years.

As part of a criminal investigation involving the Laliberte Toy Fund in Lee, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Springfield is collecting copies of Laliberte articles published in The Eagle between October 2007 and January 2012.

The Eagle reported on its website Tuesday that it was honoring the U.S. Attorney's request to obtain the articles because they already are available online. The request marked the official confirmation of a law enforcement probe of the Laliberte Toy Fund, which provides toys to needy families in the Lee area every Christmas season.

Buffis managed the fund from 1979 until it was suspended last year pending what he called a "reorganization." Buffis joined the Lee Police Department as a patrolman in 1979 and has been police chief since September 2011.

Despite news of the Laliberte probe, Buffis remains the police chief in Lee, according to Selectmen Chairwoman Patricia Carlino.

"He hasn't been charged with anything," Carlino said Wednesday.

"We have no information about the case at this time," added Town Administrator Robert Nason. "Until we do, we have no basis to take any action."

Nason and the board made similar remarks after the FBI searched the Lee Police Department and

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reportedly Buffis' home in Pittsfield nearly four months ago. The agency has refused to say what it was looking for and what, if anything, it found when it executed search warrants on Nov. 19.

Federal investigators have declined to comment on their activities, including whether Buffis is the target of an investigation. Buffis has confirmed that he has retained an attorney.

Meanwhile, the remaining members of the police force - 10 full-time members of the Lee Patrol Officers Union No. 396 -- have gone on record stating they are not subjects of an investigation.

Buffis and a union representative -- on Tuesday and Wednesday, respectively -- declined to comment about the U.S. Attorney's request to view Laliberte Toy Fund articles published by The Eagle.

The newspaper has published the Laliberte lists during the annual holiday fund drive as a community service, and The Eagle has reported occasional articles about the fund's progress.

The newspaper isn't financially or managerially involved in the fund.

Founded in 1958, the Laliberte Toy Fund continually served the Lee area until it was suspended for Christmas 2012. In an interview in December, Buffis told The Eagle the fund was undergoing a "reorganization" and would return in 2013 under new supervision.

While no donations were accepted by and no toys distributed through the toy fund last year, requests from families that would have benefited from the gift giving were forwarded to other local holiday fundraisers.

Edward J. Laliberte, a longtime Lee police officer, established the toy fund 55 years ago. It was named for him after his death in the 1980s.

The fund annually has provided toys for more than 120 children ages 9 and under in Lee, Tyringham and Lenox Dale. In recent years, the fund has raised more than \$8,000 each holiday season between Thanksgiving Day and New year's Day.

To reach Dick Lindsay:

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