

Osceola sheriff apologizes after posting photo of dead body on Instagram

Office would not say whether it depicts Madeline Soto, as critics of Marcos López are suggesting



Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel Osceola County Sheriff Marcos Lopez answers questions from the media on Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2021. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)



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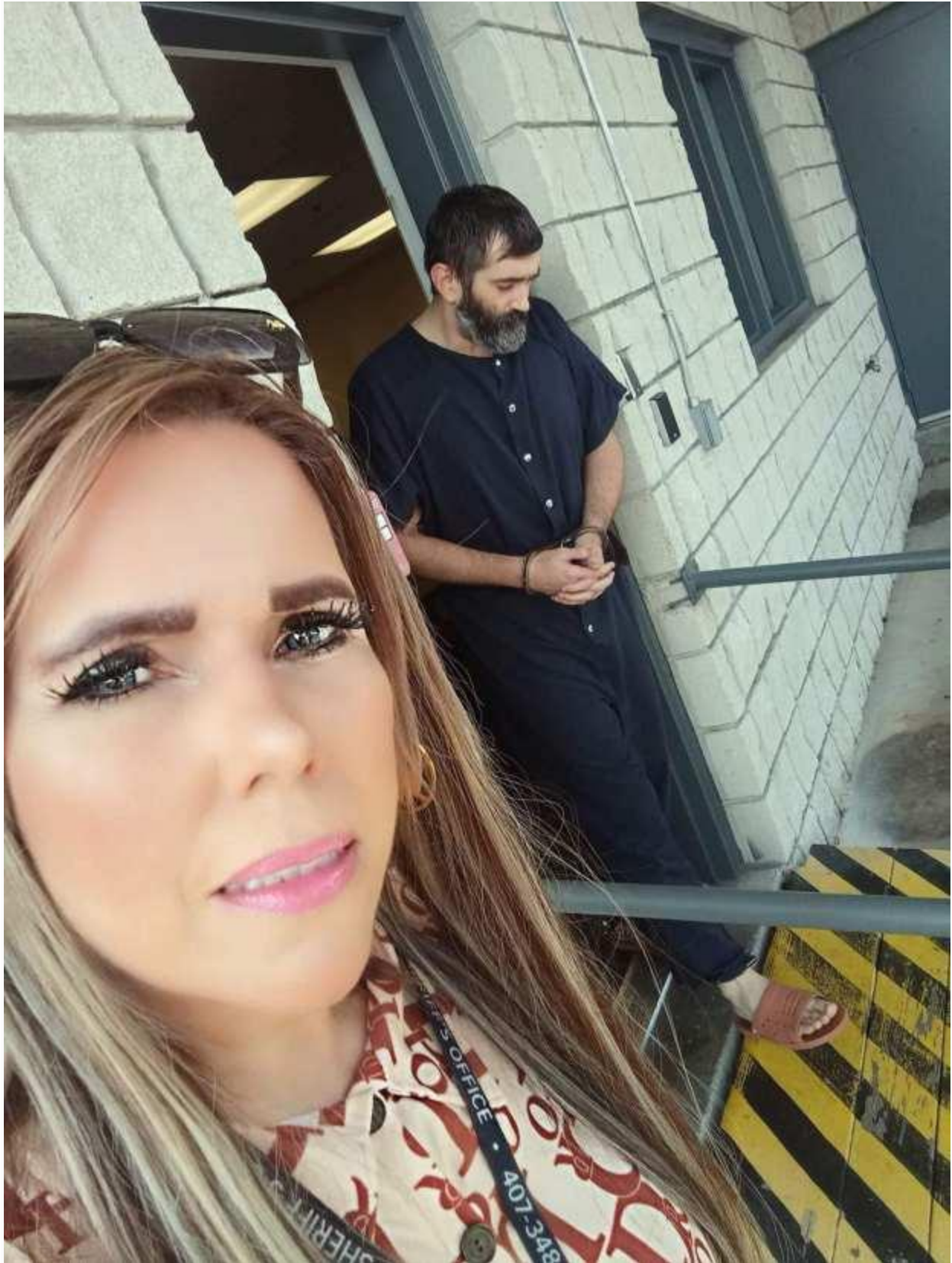
The office of Osceola County Sheriff Marcos López issued an apology after a photo of a dead body was posted to the sheriff's Instagram page, prompting an online uproar over the weekend.

The photo, which the Orlando Sentinel received but will not publish, was of a body wearing a green top and blue jeans lying beneath a mound of brush, and appeared to have been posted to López's Instagram page on Saturday along with images of a community event for seniors hosted by the sheriff. The photo was posted a day after the corpse of 13-year-old Madeline Soto [was found in rural St. Cloud by Osceola County Sheriff's Office search teams](#).

A separate photo — a selfie of agency Executive Director Nirva Rodríguez in front of Stephan Sterns, the prime suspect in Madeline's disappearance — was posted to Rodríguez's personal Facebook page, with the caption written in Spanish translated to, "If God's love has been poured out over your life, don't allow evil to keep you away from what He has prepared for you." It appears to have been taken seconds before Sterns was videoed being placed in the back of a patrol car.

The second photo also drew criticism. Both images have since been deleted.

“On March 2, 2024, a post was made on social media about a community event for seniors. In the post, an investigative photo was accidentally included. The photo was immediately removed. We deeply apologize for any confusion or disturbance this may have caused. As with any investigation, the information obtained is confidential and any mistaken disclosures will be immediately rectified,” read a statement sent to the Sentinel by an unsigned Sheriff’s Office spokesperson. The agency has not responded to a follow-up question clarifying whether the photo was of Madeline.



A selfie of Nirva Rodríguez (left), executive director of the Osceola County Sheriff's Office, with Stephan

Sterns as he was ushered into a patrol car. The image was posted to Rodriguez's personal Facebook page and was later deleted following online uproar. (Screenshot)

It wasn't long after the photo was posted that screenshots were circulating on social media. Russ Gibson, López's predecessor and primary election opponent, blasted his former deputy on the platform, saying he was "shocked and appalled" after receiving the photos from "concerned citizens."

"This is 100% unacceptable and 100% shameful and disrespectful to Madeline, her family and friends," Gibson wrote. "I do have a copy of the post but out of respect and reverence for Miss Madeline, the photograph will not be posted. The time for Marcos Lopez and certain members of his administration of dishonoring themselves, our agency, and our great County is coming to an end!"

Angel Rojas, another of López's primary opponents, also reacted: "Lack of leadership, lack of ethics, lack of honesty, lack of empathy, lack of honor. That's what they both represent. They have dishonored the Office of the Sheriff."

Florida law broadly forbids the release of photos or video of "the killing of a minor," which includes photos of a dead body, without the permission of the surviving family. Anyone who "willfully and knowingly" does so would be accused of a third-degree felony.

The Kissimmee Police Department, which is investigating Madeline's death and disappearance, declined to comment on the photo posted by López.

“The Kissimmee Police Department is working diligently on the Madeline Soto investigation and will not be making any statements or doing interviews at this time. Any questions you may have involving the Osceola County Sheriff’s Office needs to be directed to them,” spokesperson James Napier said to the Sentinel.

KPD took the lead on investigating Madeline’s death after Sterns, her mother’s boyfriend, was allegedly caught disposing of her backpack and school-issued laptop into a dumpster at an apartment complex in Kissimmee.

Jail records indicate Sterns has not been charged in Madeline’s death, but he is [considered the prime suspect](#) after a search of his phone revealed materials containing child sex abuse. He is in the Osceola County Jail without bond as he faces two charges of sexual battery of a minor, including one count for capital sexual battery on a minor under 12, which carries up to a death sentence.

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