

# The Pueblo Chieftain

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## Officer badly hurt in collision

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*Acting sergeant's car was hit by alleged drunken driver*

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN



Benjamin Candelaria



John Martinez

A Pueblo police officer suffered life-threatening injuries when his police cruiser was struck head-on late Friday by an alleged drunken driver.

Officer Benjamin Candelaria, no age listed, was being treated for bleeding on the brain and a collapsed lung Saturday at Parkview Medical Center.

"Candelaria has substantial risk of death from his injuries and a substantial risk of protracted loss or impairment of the function of any part or organ of the body," according to an arrest affidavit by Cpl. Paul Heblinger of the Pueblo Police Department's traffic division.

Arrested in the incident was 39-year-old John Paul Martinez, of the 200 block of Whitney Drive.

The incident happened at 11:30 p.m. near the intersection of Lincoln and Routt avenues. Police Chief Jim Billings said the crash is still under investigation and didn't know if speed was a factor. Candelaria was driving southwest on Lincoln when Martinez, driving a red 2007 Dodge Durango in the opposite direction on Lincoln, turned in front of Candelaria, the affidavit said.

Police found Candelaria unconscious upon arrival. Billings said Candelaria had to be extricated from the wreckage.

"When Martinez was attempting to make a left turn, the emergency equipment was activated on Candelaria's marked patrol vehicle," the affidavit said.

Martinez was treated for minor injuries at Parkview Medical Center. Martinez admitted to police he had been drinking alcohol earlier. The affidavit said Martinez smelled of alcohol, had slurred speech and had watery, blood-shot eyes.

Martinez gave police blood and urine samples to be tested for alcohol, the affidavit said.

Martinez was booked into Pueblo County jail on suspicion of driving under the influence of alcohol, vehicular assault, violation of a protection order barring him from drinking alcohol, and reckless driving. He is being held without chance of bail until a court appearance next week.

Both vehicles were totaled in the accident, which closed the roadway for several hours.

"The airbags deployed in both vehicles, and officer Candelaria was using his seat belt and wearing body armor, which likely protected him from sustaining even more serious injuries," a press release said.

Billings said it's unknown whether Martinez was wearing a seat belt. "We may never know because (Martinez) was being uncooperative."

The car Candelaria was driving is an older model and wasn't equipped with video surveillance, Billings said.

The 10th Judicial District's Critical Incident Team, composed of investigators from every law enforcement agency in Pueblo County, was not called to investigate the wreck. The team probes serious officer-related shootings and accidents.

"No, (the critical incident team) wasn't called out on this one. Maybe they should have, but it didn't enter my mind," Billings said. "We did call the on-duty (district attorney) and they came out with an investigator. If need be we'll have the (Colorado) State Patrol review the investigation."

The police department's traffic division is still reconstructing the accident

A nine-year veteran of the police department, Candelaria was the acting sergeant on the South Side of town Friday night. Billings said Candelaria, or "Candy" as he's called by fellow officers, was on routine patrol and wasn't heading to a call at the time of the accident.

This wasn't Candelaria's first time injured while on duty.

"He had a serious back injury a few years ago and made a miraculous recovery to come back to work," Billings said.

Billings didn't remember the exact incident, but it possibly occurred in November 2005, when Candelaria was dragged outside a police cruiser commandeered by suspected parole-jumper on the South Side.

A 21-year-old man was running from police early one morning and tried taking an unattended police cruiser. Candelaria, fresh off of desk duty following shoulder surgery, tried pulling the suspect from the car.

The suspect accelerated, dragging Candelaria for a distance before wrecking into another police cruiser. Candelaria was injured during the impact.