
Former Chelsea court clerk sentenced for coercing women into sex

Posted by Martin Finucane

By Shelley Murphy, Globe Staff

A former Chelsea District Court clerk magistrate was sentenced today to two years in federal prison for coercing two women into having sex with him at the courthouse.

"He took my dignity," one of the victims told the judge just before James M. Burke, 43, of Chelsea, was sentenced. "He took advantage of me when I was in a vulnerable state in my life."

Burke, who was fired from his \$84,000-a-year job after his arrest last year, was convicted by a federal jury in October of two counts of depriving the women of their civil rights.

One of the women testified at the trial that Burke pulled her from the courthouse lockup after her arrest on a prostitution charge in 2005 and brought her to an empty courtroom, where she performed sex on him in exchange for his promise to get her case dismissed. The case still went forward. The other woman said Burke threatened to lock her up last year unless she had sex with him at the courthouse.

US District Judge George A. O'Toole Jr. said Burke used his position to prey on vulnerable women, adding, "It is worse when the abuse of power occurs in the judicial branch."

The judge ordered Burke to report to prison Jan. 14.

Burke declined to comment during the hearing, but his lawyer, Robert Sheketoff, said Burke would "roam the streets" seeking prostitutes for sexual satisfaction and "in some ways the courthouse became a safe haven to do what he did."

He added that Burke was not responsible for the long tradition of prostitution and that the victims "bear some responsibility, too. They bear some responsibility for their lives."

But Assistant US Attorney Brian T. Kelly said it was "ludicrous" to blame the victims. He said, "They are in court trying to clear up a case and he ends up sexually assaulting them. All of the blame should be placed on the defendant."
