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Former sheriff's deputy charged in connection with Jesters probe

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Federal prosecutors charged a former Erie County sheriff's deputy with taking prostitutes

across state lines five years ago to attend a convention of a fraternal club.

Michael Lesinski, who retired from police work in November 2008, is the latest person charged in a government probe into human-trafficking activities involving the Royal Order of

Jesters.

Lesinski made arrangements for a limousine to transport at least a dozen prostitutes from

Buffalo Niagara International Airport in Cheektowaga to a hotel in Niagara Falls, Ont., in

April 2005, according to charges filed by the U.S. attorney's office.

Niagara Falls was the site of a Jesters convention — known as a "book" — for

Jesters from across the United States, FBI Special Agent Jennifer Amo said in court papers.

Retired State Supreme Court Justice Ronald H. Tills — who is now in prison — was in charge of transportation for the event, Amo said.

"This transportation was for [Jesters] members and the "Jester Girls" [prostitutes]," Amo said in court papers. "Tills delegated that duty to Michael Lesinski, a member of the [Jesters] and then an active deputy sheriff with the Erie County Sheriff's Department." Amo also said witnesses had told her that Tills was involved in recruiting "Jester Girls" for events in several cities.

Lesinski is charged with conspiring to violate the Mann Act, a federal law that prohibits transporting people across state lines for prostitution.

The former road deputy, who was with the Sheriff's Office for 21 years, is expected to appear before Magistrate Judge H. Kenneth Schroeder Jr. Wednesday afternoon for arraignment.

Rodney O. Personius, Lesinski's attorney, said his client will plead not guilty.

"I'd have to say that I'm surprised, disappointed and confounded by the decision to move

forward on this case at this time," Personius added. "The government has known about

this

incident for a very long time."

The Buffalo News reported in May 2008 that the Western New York Human Trafficking Task

Force was investigating two deputies.

Law enforcement officials said the inquiry focused on deputies who assisted with travel arrangements for prostitutes from the Buffalo area to Jesters events in other cities.

Authorities declined to comment on the status of the other deputy who was under investigation.

Members of the Jesters, a nationwide men's group associated with the Masons, have included

Presidents, Harry S. Truman and Gerald R. Ford, as well as many prominent businessmen and

public officials.

Jesters officials said the group is dedicated to the pursuit of "mirth and merriment," but the group insists it does not authorize or condone having prostitutes at its functions.

Agents from the FBI, U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement and other agencies have been

investigating human-trafficking allegations involving the Jesters since at least 2007.

Last August, Tills, the retired judge, was sentenced to 18 months in prison. He pleaded guilty to a felony violation of the Mann Act and admitted he had recruited prostitutes,

— including some who worked at local massage parlors — for Jesters gatherings.

At Jesters' events, "there is typically a hospitality room where a list of women [and room numbers] can be found," Amo said in court papers. "[Jesters] members can then visit the rooms

and pay the women to engage in sexual acts."

A former Lockport police captain and a former law clerk for Tills were sentenced to probation after taking guilty pleas in the case.

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