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Deputy arrested after inmate says he made sexual advances

By KEVIN TURNER
Nassau Neighbors staff writer,

YULEE -- For eight years, none of Deputy Jarrett Wade Hodges' coworkers at the Nassau County Sheriff's Department suspected the former chief of the Hilliard Police Department as someone who would solicit a jail inmate for sex or tamper with evidence in his care, Sheriff Tommy Seagraves said.

"We had no clue. I've known Jarrett since he was a teenager," Seagraves said. "You hear the story, and then you have to ask yourself if it's believable."

But the department's trust in Hodges ended after an unnamed 24-year-old male inmate claimed Hodges made sexual advances against him in the sheriff's department evidence room June 29. Hodges did it again June 30, but this time the inmate wore a hidden recording device, Seagraves said.

Hodges, 36, headed Hilliard's police department when it was abolished in February 1998 because of a lack of funding. He has worked since as an evidence technician for the Nassau County Sheriff's Department.

The unnamed inmate is a Nassau County Jail trusty. Trusties are inmates who have been sentenced to less than a year and have not been charged in the past of trying to escape custody. Seagraves said he prefers trusties who aren't drug or sex felons. Only about 10 percent of the jail's inmates are eligible for the program.

"He's a trusty who works on the car-wash rack. We don't have a lawn service. Everything's taken care of by inmates. They're sentenced inmates. We screen them all," Seagraves said.

According to a Nassau County Sheriff's Office report released Friday, the inmate told investigators Hodges offered to help him get his car back after it was seized. He said Hodges asked him to help move furniture in the evidence locker June 28, and told him he had pornographic videotapes. He said Hodges asked him back to the evidence room June 29, when he showed pornography and made sexual advances before he left.

The inmate said Hodges told him that he "could make the victim's time here hard or easy," according to the sheriff's office.

The inmate then told sheriff's office investigators what Hodges allegedly had done. He offered to wire himself to prove his story, and Seagraves agreed.

On June 30, the inmate returned to the evidence room at Hodges' request, and Hodges again was showing pornography, the report read. As Hodges made sexual advances, he found the microphone on the inmate and immediately stopped, Seagraves said.

"He saw the bug. When he saw it, he knew what it was," Seagraves said.

The inmate, seeing a gun amid the evidence, ran from the room, Seagraves said.

Seagraves and other investigators then listened to the recording, Seagraves said.

"You could hear the pornography in the background," he said.

When Undersheriff Carl Woodle confronted Hodges, he immediately surrendered his keys and tendered his resignation, Seagraves said.

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Hodges told Seagraves later June 30 that the inmate had asked him for cocaine. The inmate denied asking for cocaine, but told Seagraves that Hodges told him he would "take care of him."

Seagraves said he took control of all keys to the evidence room and called the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to audit the room's narcotics, guns and money, Seagraves said.

"I don't feel that anything's missing, but you don't know," he said.

Investigators said when they searched Hodges' official vehicle, they found a sealed videotape containing child pornography from a 2000 investigation.

"At the time of this report, it is unknown why the child pornography evidence was in Hodges' issued vehicle," investigator Shawn Mortimer wrote.

Investigators said they didn't know whether other videotapes found in the vehicle were evidence or if they belonged to Hodges, but he admitted two videotapes in his office were evidence he had claimed was destroyed, according to the report.

Hodges was arrested Thursday for official misconduct, tampering with evidence, battery and unnatural and lascivious acts.

Hodges does not have a listed phone number. A representative of the Nassau County Clerk of Courts office said Monday charges hadn't been filed, so there is no attorney of record.

Seagraves said he is now assigning two officers to monitor the office's evidence room.

"I have a lot of people who are here to do a good job and are here for all the right reasons. I've disciplined and terminated quite a few people since I took office. People are looking for trust in police officers. If you lose your integrity, you've lost everything a police officer is," Seagraves said.

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