

Ex-sheriff's deputy found guilty of raping inmate during transport

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2016 Cop Rape Ernest Justin Blanchette

Former Belknap County sheriff's deputy Ernest Justin Blanchette was convicted Thursday of raping an inmate last summer while transporting her to the state prison in Goffstown.

A jury of nine men and three women returned a guilty verdict on one count of aggravated felonious sexual assault, finding that Blanchette, now 36, used his authority as a law enforcement officer to coerce the woman into sex. Blanchette never denied the contact, but claimed it had been consensual.

The law, however, was not ultimately on his side. Prosecutors argued the woman was in no position to consent, given Blanchette's role as her transporting officer, and was furthermore bribed with cigarettes and the use of Blanchette's phone.

Blanchette stood expressionless as the verdict was announced late Thursday in Manchester, following two days of testimony. Judge Gillian Abramson ordered his bail revoked and a sentencing hearing scheduled for next month. Blanchette is facing between 10 and 20 years in prison, but his attorney, Brad Davis, said ultimate discretion would lie with Abramson.

Davis plans to appeal the conviction based on an issue that surfaced Thursday, involving the portion of the aggravated felonious sexual assault statute used to convict Blanchette. The law says a rape through coercive authority occurs when the defendant has direct supervision over the victim and the victim is incarcerated in a correctional facility "where the actor is employed."

Davis argued Thursday that Blanchette is exempt from the statute because he was employed by the county sheriff, not the prison. Abramson allowed jurors to decide, but it remains an open legal question, Davis said.

Blanchette still faces nine other counts of sexual assault involving this and other inmates in Belknap County. The inmate in the Manchester case said she first had sex with him during a trip to the dentist on Sept. 18, 2014.

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