

Bond for Manatee Sheriff's Lt. Dale Couch set at \$207,500

By SHANNON McFARLAND

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The sheriff's office received Couch's letter of resignation today although it was dated May 23, announcing that he had resigned and canceling the hearing to determine if he should be terminated from his job.

Hours earlier, a judge had denied prosecutors' motion for pretrial detention for Couch, arrested Thursday after being accused of molesting two children. Couch was held on no bond over the weekend, on a courtesy hold in the Sarasota County Jail.

The motion was filed and evidence presented by Assistant State Attorney Dawn Buff to a judge at hearings on Friday and Saturday. Buff presented evidence to the court that Couch posed a "credible threat of violence," with a counselor offering testimony. Maj. Connie Shingledecker of the sheriff's office also testified, stating that Couch had turned himself in peacefully and without signs of trouble.

After Judge Thomas Krug denied the motion of pretrial detention, prosecutors asked for \$500,000 bond for each of the two life felony charges and \$75,000 for the second-degree felony charge.

Krug set bond for Couch at a total of \$207,500 this morning. Bond was set at \$100,000 for each of the two counts of lewd and lascivious molestation of a child under age 12. The victim was 9 years old at the time of the allegations last summer and the two counts carry a potential life sentence. Bond for the third charge, a second-degree felony of lewd and lascivious molestation against a child who was then 12, was set at \$7,500.

As part of the bond terms, Couch will also wear an ankle monitor, turn over any firearms to the sheriff's office and have no contact with either victim.

Couch knew both children, although his defense attorney, Greg Hagopian, said Couch has had no contact with either child since the allegations first surfaced last July.

Hagopian said Couch, 50, was hoping to be released Tuesday. He is a 20-year veteran of the sheriff's office.

"We're very relieved that he's been given a bond and has been released and can defend himself pending a trial," Hagopian said. "He very much looks forward to clearing his name."

Hagopian said he was troubled about the multiple times these children were interviewed, the length of the interviews and "the opportunity for them to be led or coached."

Months after the initial investigation into the allegation was closed in November, with no charges filed, Couch had returned to work at the sheriff's office. It was not until March that a counselor came forward with new information from the older victim that the case was reopened.

Initially, the 12-year-old girl said Couch had inappropriately touched her once.

"She said that while he was over her (in her bed) yelling and cussing at her, he grabbed her breasts with his hands," according to the arrest report.

Then in March, the counselor came forward to report additional allegations, that the girl had stated Couch had also inappropriately touched her private areas on multiple other occasions while she sat on his lap. The 9-year-old victim had reported similar allegations, with a third child also interviewed who reportedly witnessed such instances on multiple occasions.

The 12-year-old girl stated that she did not disclose this during the initial reporting last summer because she was afraid that Couch "would do more than he was already doing," according to reports. Enraged when he first heard the allegations, Couch punched a door in his home and knocked it completely off its hinges, in front of both victims, according to his arrest report. The girl said Couch told her when she was younger not to tell anyone about the touching, because it would "break her mother's heart," he would be arrested and then lose his career.

Couch told detectives in another interview in March that all three children are lying, according to his arrest report. Couch acknowledged the girls had sat on his lap numerous times, in his office and living room, but repeatedly denied ever touching them inappropriately.

EARLIER: In a one-sentence letter, Lt. Dale Couch resigned from the Manatee County Sheriff's Office today, just hours after a judge set his bond on charges of child molestation.

The sheriff's office received Couch's letter of resignation today although it was dated May 23, announcing that he had resigned and canceling the hearing to determine if he should be terminated from his job.

Hours earlier, a judge had denied prosecutors' motion for pretrial detention for Couch, arrested last Thursday after being accused of molesting two children. Couch was held on no bond over the weekend, on a courtesy hold in the Sarasota County Jail.

The motion was filed and evidence presented by Assistant State Attorney Dawn Buff to a judge at hearings on Friday and Saturday. Buff presented evidence to the court that Couch posed a "credible threat of violence," with a counselor offering testimony. Maj. Connie Shingledecker of the sheriff's office also testified, stating that Couch had turned himself in peacefully and without signs of trouble.

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"We're very relieved that he's been given a bond and has been released and can defend himself pending a trial," Hagopian said. "He very much looks forward to clearing his name."

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Couch told detectives in another interview in March that all three children are lying, according to his arrest report. Couch acknowledged the girls had sat on his lap numerous times, in his office and living room, but repeatedly denied ever touching them inappropriately.

EARLIER: A judge denied prosecutors' motion for pretrial detention this morning for Manatee County Sheriff's Lt. Dale Couch, arrested last Thursday after being accused of molesting two children.

A closed hearing at the Manatee County Sheriff's Office also set for today will determine if Couch loses his job as a result of the three charges against him.

Couch was held on no bond over the weekend, as his attorney and the judge considered the motion and evidence presented by Assistant State Attorney Dawn Buff at bond hearings on Friday and Saturday. Buff presented evidence to the court that Couch posed a "credible threat of violence," with a counselor offering testimony. Maj. Connie Shingledecker of the sheriff's office also testified, stating that Couch had turned himself in peacefully and without signs of trouble.

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