

## Westmoreland: Police chief shocked at officer's arrest

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A former Westmoreland police officer was arrested on charges of statutory rape after being accused of having sex at least twice with an underage girl.

John Edwin Puckett, 49, was arrested by the Sumner County Sheriff's Office on Tuesday and charged with aggravated statutory rape and soliciting sexual exploitation of a minor.

According to an affidavit filed in a Sumner County Court, Puckett admitted to Westmoreland Police Chief Kenneth Smith that he had sex with the unidentified girl. Puckett then resigned his commission.

Smith confirmed the affidavit's account in an interview Wednesday, saying he went to the Puckett's house on Tuesday morning when the officer failed to show up for work.

Smith said Puckett told him that he had gotten himself into major trouble and needed to resign.

"That threw me for a loop," Smith said. "I was speechless at first."

The affidavit also stated a sheriff's deputy found nude photos of Puckett on the victim's cell phone, as well as a video of him performing a sex act. The former officer declined to talk with investigators, the document said.

Authorities were alerted to the case when the girl's mother was told of the allegations. The mother then "confronted the defendant who had admitted he had sex with her daughter" on two occasions, the affidavit said.

Smith said he and other officers in Westmoreland, a town of 2,200 people about 18 miles northeast of Gallatin, are still shocked at the charges against Puckett, a man they say was regarded highly since he was hired two months ago. Puckett also is a former longtime Sumner County Sheriff's deputy.

Nevertheless, the chief said he has no issue with how the investigation has been handled into the officer he once supervised.

"When a police officer crosses a line like this, it needs to be dealt with and he needs to be charged," Smith said.

Westmoreland Mayor Mike Carter said Wednesday that he was also caught off guard when he learned of Puckett's arrest.

"When I was made aware of it, it came as a shock because we like to think our police department

is as professional as any police department,” he said. “It’s very unfortunate for the city, our police department and everybody involved, families and so on.”

Puckett passed all of his background checks before he was hired, Carter said.

“We had an opening,” Carter said. “There was no reason not to hire him.”

Puckett remains in the Sumner County Jail in Gallatin on a \$150,000 bond, said an official from the Sumner County Jail. His initial court date is scheduled for Sept. 4, she said.

Sarah Kingsbury contributed to this report.