

Savannah deputy jailed in wider molestation probe

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SAVANNAH, Ga. -- Prosecutors told a judge on Friday that a 2008 allegation of aggravated child molestation against Chatham County Sheriff's Deputy Lt. Richard Adam "Rick" Hall was just "the tip of the iceberg."

"We are just scratching the surface," Assistant District Attorney Emily Puhala told Chatham County Superior Court Judge Timothy R. Walmsley during a bond hearing held in chambers.

Puhala said the state was "strenuously opposed" to bond for Hall.

Following the hearing, Walmsley denied bond for Hall, a 28-year veteran deputy sheriff, based, in part, on the sheer volume of what he had heard.

"It sounds like there are a lot of moving parts in play," Walmsley said.

He ruled that Hall poses a significant:

- threat or danger to person(s) to the community, or to property in the community.
- risk of intimidating witnesses or otherwise obstructing the administration of justice.

Walmsley told defense attorney Alex Zipperer he would be open to reconsidering the bond request at a later date if evidence merited it but would allow prosecutors a "reasonable period" before taking the issue up again.

Hall, 52, was arrested at his Wilmington Island home Dec. 20 on a charge of aggravated child molestation of a male, now 17, that allegedly occurred in April/May 2008. The victim was 12 at the time.

Hall, who did not attend Friday's hearing, remains in custody at the Chatham County Jail, where he is being held in the medical wing. He has been placed on administrative leave without pay from his duties with the sheriff's department.

Chief Assistant District Attorney Greg McConnell told Walmsley on Friday Hall had a male roommate, 18, in the Wilmington Island house, as well as a boy who is almost 3. They have been removed and the house closed down, prosecutors said.

Five other people have made allegations against Hall to civilians, not police, that "they have been molested by Hall. They are now adults," McConnell said.

Investigators are looking into allegations that Hall used his official position to influence numerous witnesses, including threats against parents who are on probation, McConnell said.

McConnell also told Walmsley federal investigators informed him this week that Hall is the “target” of a Department of Justice child pornography investigation and officials were preparing to execute a search warrant in that case.

Zipperer argued there was an “awful lot of spinning going on” with the state’s case.

“I don’t see that there’s any evidence of current misbehavior,” he told the judge.

He said the state’s “vague allegations” stemmed from the 2008 case.

“They’re not alleging current, ongoing activity,” Zipperer said. “It doesn’t seem to amount to a whole lot to me.”

According to Puhala, the 2008 case resurfaced last week after a jail inmate complained that Hall was using his official position to keep custody of a child.

During execution of a search warrant, investigators found pictures of sexual erotica but not pornography, prosecutors said. Hall’s personal computers are being reviewed for content, they said.

In the case of the then-12-year-old, Hall asked his family whether the boy could come to Hall’s house and do yard work, McConnell said.

The child would return home with “large sums of cash” but wasn’t getting dirty, the prosecutor said. Hall then would pressure the child’s mother, who was on probation, when she tried to halt the conduct.

Hall also picked the child up from school without authorization, McConnell said.

During the execution of the search warrant at Hall’s residence, investigators found “a very large stash of cash, several thousand dollars,” Puhala said.

The investigation of the 2008 case “abruptly stopped,” McConnell said, and was never reported to either the Savannah police nor the District Attorney’s office, he said.

In the case of the 2-year-old, McConnell said Hall was his “legal guardian” and when the mother attempted to end that, Hall threatened to report her to the Department of Family & Children Services to take the child away.