

Butte County sheriff's deputy arrested on child molestation charges

By Almendra Carpizo and Ryan Olson acarpizo@chicoer.com rolson@chicoer.com Posted: 11/13/2014 03:56:01 PM PST

chicoer.com

CHICO >> A Butte County Sheriff's Office deputy is facing allegations that he molested an 11-year-old girl, according to authorities.

Thomas Michael Sylvia, 37, was taken into custody Monday following a seven-month investigation by the Chico Police Department.

Sylvia appeared in custody Thursday in Butte County Superior Court. Defense attorney Jodea Foster, who was retained to represent Sylvia, entered a not guilty plea to the single felony count of committing a lewd act on a minor under 14.

Retired Judge Steven Howell granted Sylvia's release with a promise to return to court. There were also conditions that the defendant stay away from the child, the child's school and residence, deputy district attorney Jennifer Dupre-Tokos said outside of court.

Foster said releasing Sylvia on his own recognizance was appropriate, given the defendant's history and because his family is here. He said the defendant was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army after serving tours in two conflicts and transitioned from military police to civilian law enforcement.

The prosecution objected to the defendant's release, primarily due to the nature of the case.

The father of the child also told the court the defendant had contact with the child the Sunday prior to Sylvia's arrest. The child's family had been at the defendant's residence.

The judge noted there were strong conditions on Sylvia's release and asked the father if he knew whom to speak with if there was a possible violation of the agreement.

Sleepover incident

In late April, Sylvia became the subject of an investigation into an allegation of lewd and lascivious acts with a child under 14 years of age, Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey said.

The incident is alleged to have occurred on April 26 when an 11-year-old girl slept over at Sylvia's residence, Ramsey said. The girl stated someone snuck into the bedroom and touched her inappropriately.

The girl told her father about what happened the morning following the alleged act, deputy district attorney Stacy Edwards said at her office. The father contacted Chico police, leading to the

investigation.

Sylvia's case has taken this long because the child was initially unable to identify who touched her, Ramsey said during a telephone interview. A DNA was ordered and sent to the state Department of Justice. It came back a week or two ago, he added.

Ramsey explained that the DNA obtained is "touch DNA" that came from an article of clothing.

It's believed the DNA came from his hand after he allegedly touched her in an intimate area, he said.

The Butte County Sheriff's Office was notified in April that Sylvia was a suspect in the case, Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea said. The Sheriff's Office informed Chico police that it would fully cooperate with the investigation.

Chico police recontacted the Sheriff's Office in May to report that investigators were focused on Sylvia. The Sheriff's Office subsequently placed him on administrative leave pending the completion of the investigation, Honea told this newspaper.

After his arrest Monday, Sylvia was first booked into Butte County Jail in Oroville, but moved to for safety purposes, Honea said.

The defendant had been held at Glenn County Jail with initial bail set at \$50,000, Foster said outside of court Thursday.

Worked at courthouse

Sylvia, who has been with the Sheriff's Office since 2005, remains on administrative leave, however, the Sheriff's Office is working diligently to complete its internal affairs investigation to ensure appropriate action is taken, Honea said.

Prior to his arrest, Sylvia was working as a courthouse bailiff, Honea said. There is no indication that any of the alleged crimes are related to his official duties as a deputy.

If convicted, the defendant may be sentenced to up to eight years in state prison.

The defendant's next court appearance will be Wednesday, when a preliminary hearing date may be set. At the preliminary hearing, a judge will hear evidence and determine if there is probable cause to hold Sylvia for trial.

Local judges have recused themselves from the case, Ramsey said. Because Sylvia was a bailiff, they don't want any appearances of conflict of interest.

The Sheriff's Office is cooperating with Chico police and the investigation, Honea said. Any time there are allegations of this nature, they are taken seriously and the Sheriff's Office works to

investigate it thoroughly.

Sylvia's alleged conduct does not reflect on the work of the vast majority of law enforcement in this community, Honea said.

Contact reporter Almendra Carpizo at 896-7760.

Contact Ryan Olson at 896-7763.