

St. Petersburg Times (FL)

February 25, 2005

2nd Deputy is Target of Sex Complaint

By Jacob H. Fries, St. Petersburg Times

A second Pinellas sheriff's deputy has been accused of having inappropriate sexual contact with a woman he had been called to protect during a domestic dispute.

Sheriff Jim Coats confirmed that internal affairs detectives are looking into a complaint against Deputy Gerald Akins. His accuser has alleged that in July after a fight with her boyfriend, Akins drove her to her home and masturbated there.

This comes after Deputy Shane Collinsworth admitted in a Feb. 9 deposition that he had consensual sex with an alleged victim of a domestic case he was investigating.

Both deputies remain on the job while the allegations are investigated. "If substantiated, those individuals will be sanctioned for their conduct," Coats said.

Neither deputy returned telephone messages.

The accusations involve women caught in volatile relationships who turned to authorities during moments of vulnerability and fear. If it happened, such conduct is predatory, domestic violence experts said.

"On so many levels, it's wrong," said Christina Walsh, a spokeswoman for the Texas-based National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, which trains law enforcement officers to deal with victims. "The officer has the power over that individual, and so it is harassment."

The woman who dated Collinsworth, 36, said in an interview that she never complained, initially thinking his behavior was not out of line. The second woman told a reporter she did not report Akins, 35, until months later because she was ashamed and blamed herself.

The women's names are being withheld by the St. Petersburg Times because of the nature of the accusations.

Walsh said that if the accusations are true, they could have lingering consequences for the sheriff's office. "If that happens to one woman in one community, how many women are going to hear about it and not call law enforcement?" she said.

Florida law makes it a crime for nurses, doctors and mental health professionals to have sexual contact with patients.

The rules of conduct governing Pinellas deputies, by contrast, do not specifically forbid a deputy from developing a relationship with a victim of a crime he is investigating. Nor do the rules at the police departments in St. Petersburg, Clearwater and Tampa or at the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office.

Coats said he was considering a policy change.

News of Collinsworth's relationship with an alleged victim of domestic violence surfaced in the Feb. 9 deposition.

The woman's live-in boyfriend, Thomas L. Sand, was arrested by Collinsworth and a backup on July 10, 2004. Sand was charged with aggravated assault, spousal battery and tampering with a witness.

Collinsworth contacted the woman a week later, the woman said during a brief interview. In her deposition, she said she contacted him.

The two went on a few dates, had sex and then stopped talking sometime in late December, the woman said in her deposition.

Collinsworth, in his four years with the department, has received several letters of commendation, but he also has been the subject of numerous internal investigations. Among them were complaints that in 2003 he threatened a male friend of his estranged wife and in 2004 threatened the boyfriend of a woman he had dated. Detectives were unable to substantiate either claim.

The allegations against Akins, the other deputy, came from a second woman who e-mailed the sheriff earlier this month because she feared investigators were ignoring her complaint. Coats said he spoke with the woman over the phone and assured her there would be a proper investigation.

The woman said she called 911 in late July because her boyfriend refused to leave her Dunedin apartment. Akins and another deputy arrived.

Before Akins left the apartment, the deputy leaned over and kissed the woman, she said.

A few days later, the woman called authorities from a convenience store after another verbal altercation with her boyfriend. Akins, she said, was one of the responders.

The woman said she was very drunk and Akins drove her home. There, the woman said, Akins fondled her and masturbated, then left five minutes later.

Because the woman was intoxicated and there were no other witnesses, Coats said it would be hard to substantiate her claims.

Akins joined the sheriff's office in October 1995, receiving good marks during annual evaluations and a Gold Star Award for outstanding service in 2003.

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