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Lab delays led to delay in his arrest;
Before a rape suspect was charged, he held other jobs.
By: DEIRDRE CONNER

Last week's arrest of Gerall Bernard Smalls leaves a trail of questions about how he slipped through the cracks while working with some of the region's most vulnerable people.

Smalls, 38, is charged in the rape of a patient at Ten Broeck Hospital, a Jacksonville mental health treatment center where he was a mental health technician. The woman reported in September 2006 that Smalls assaulted her.

But he wasn't charged until this month because evidence needed for the arrest sat in a crime lab for a year.

While police waited, Smalls worked at least two other jobs with at-risk populations.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement, which handles police department requests for DNA evidence processing, is backlogged, as are most crime labs state- and nationwide.

That meant the evidence in the Smalls case - stained bed sheets sent to FDLE within weeks of the assault - sat in storage until August, when it finally was sent to a private lab, said Sharon Gogerty, spokeswoman for the department.

The department typically prioritizes rape cases where there is a known suspect, Gogerty said, although she couldn't speak specifically to this case. Despite that, she said of the delay, "With all the cases that we have, unfortunately it's been typical."

The hospital wouldn't release details about Smalls except to say he no longer was employed at Ten Broeck, said Sherry Magee, vice president of community investment.

Reached by phone Friday, Smalls said he didn't want to comment.

He was hired in May as a social worker at Hastings Youth Academy, a facility in St. Johns County for juvenile criminal offenders. That facility has been plagued for the past year with allegations of staff misconduct.

Smalls wasn't accused of any wrongdoing at Hastings, but his employment has been terminated because of the rape arrest, said Mike Powers, a spokesman for G4S Youth Services, the contracted company that runs Hastings.

Powers said Smalls didn't list his part-time job at Ten Broeck on his employment application.

He did list a job with Lakeview Health Systems, a substance-abuse treatment center, where he worked between August 2006 and May, Powers said. Calls to Lakeview by the Times-Union weren't returned.

Powers said Smalls also previously worked for the state Department of Children and Families.

He said Smalls' references for those employers were called and raised no red flags, and that Smalls passed a criminal background check before he was hired. The company also confirmed his master's degree in social work.

He has had misdemeanor charges for bad checks, leaving the scene of an accident and driving while license suspended or revoked. None of those would disqualify him during a background check required for public employees who work with children.

"The sad thing is it took a year," Powers said. "If he had been charged [before] we never would have hired him."