

County jail staffers indicted in smuggling scheme

Officer, janitor and inmates allegedly formed tobacco-selling network

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Union County Jail, beset with strife since the flagrant escape of two inmates in December, was the setting for a scheme in which a corrections officer and a janitor allegedly smuggled tobacco to four inmates, authorities said.

On Wednesday, the officer, Stephen Matthews, 48, of Union, and Joseph Pecoraro, 37, of Elizabeth, were indicted by a Union County grand jury on charges of official misconduct, bribery and conspiracy to commit bribery.

The 19-count indictment also charged convicted murderer Jeremy Watson, 22, of Plainfield, with being the lead distributor inside the facility. Watson in turn doled out the tobacco, for resale, to three other inmates: Abdul Griggs, 36, of Piscataway, Shariff Raymond, 27, of Elizabeth, and Jadon Russell, 29, of Linden, according to the indictment.

"The motivation for the charges listed in the indictment was simple greed," Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said. "It's another troubling chapter in the history of the Union County Jail as it existed prior to the changes that were put into effect as a result of the escapes in December 2007."

The jail gained notoriety three months ago for lax supervision that let two inmates escape through holes they bored into cinder-block walls. The escape was not uncovered for some 20 hours.

Now Matthews is accused of taking at least \$560 in bribes -- on at least three occasions -- in exchange for the loose tobacco and packs of cigarettes he allegedly smuggled into the jail. Pecoraro is accused of accepting \$200 bribes on "numerous" occasions in exchange for delivering tobacco and cigarettes and a cell phone.

Loose tobacco that would sell in stores for about \$1 an ounce fetched as much as \$75 inside the jail, according to Union County Assistant Prosecutor William Kolano.

The underground operation generated "a lot of money, well into the thousands of dollars," Romankow said. If the defendants are convicted of the charges, they face up to 10 years in prison.

Pecoraro, a county worker since June 1999, was a janitor and handyman assigned to the jail. He faces an additional charge of providing Watson with a cell phone.

Both county employees have been suspended without pay.

Matthews earned a base salary of \$74,000. Pecoraro earned \$48,671.

Kolano said the illicit operation began in April 2007.

"The investigation involved extensive surveillance and detailed monitoring of movements among the players," Kolano said.

After authorities were tipped to the scheme, it took less than two months for the investigators on the case -- Lt. Robert McGuire with the Union County police and Investigator Donald Johnson, with the county corrections department's internal affairs unit -- to gather evidence and arrest the men last August, Kolano said.

Also facing charges is Watson's girlfriend, Kelly Spicer, 36, of Elizabeth. She allegedly was the link between the inmates and Matthews and Pecoraro. Spicer allegedly dropped payoff money meant for the county employees in Matthews' late model Lexus SUV in a Union County parking lot.

The investigators watched Matthews walk into the jail on Aug. 22, 2007, with Bugler tobacco and Marlboro cigarettes, according to the indictment. That same day, investigators allegedly found wrappings for the loose tobacco in Matthews' car, along with an envelope marked "\$100." The indictment also said DNA analysis determined Spicer's saliva was on the envelope found inside Matthews' car.

Attorney Timothy Smith, who represents Matthews, said he does not believe there is any merit to the charges against his client, who has worked at the jail for 17 years.

"He has the reputation of being one of the most honest, good-natured and humble corrections officers," Smith said. "When the charges came down, everybody was just shocked that he would be accused of something like this. His record is impeccable. He is devastated by these charges.

"I think in the end, the evidence is going to reveal there was no intentional scheme for him to benefit in any way," the attorney said. "He was being goodhearted."

Pecoraro's attorney could not be reached for comment.