

MAINE CRIME: Posted July 18

Somerset County detective praised for work on child sex crimes

Detective Jeremy Leal has received training in skills that are required to investigate sexual assaults against children.

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SKOWHEGAN — The arrest this month of a man living in Pennsylvania on charges that he sexually assaulted a 9-year-old girl in Maine and the recent sentencing of a Pittsfield man to 20 years in the state prison for sex crimes against a child have generated praise for the detective who mounted the investigations.

Detective Jeremy Leal, of the Somerset County Sheriff’s Office Criminal Division, has been trained to rein in “crimes against persons,” Sheriff Dale Lancaster said in an email Wednesday.

“When I took office, I worked with the (county) commissioners to create a position that specifically deals with crimes against persons,” Lancaster said. “Detective Jeremy Leal was selected for this position. Detective Leal has been sent to numerous, comprehensive trainings that focus on developing the skills required to investigate sexual assaults against children.”

Lancaster said Leal also is a certified forensic interviewer through the National Children’s Advocacy Center in Huntsville, Alabama, and recently was sent to Connecticut, where he received certification in extended forensic interviewing.

Leal’s investigation in the case of Michael Towle, 45, of Pittsfield, resulted in a guilty plea and a prison sentence of 20 years, according to court documents. Towle was arrested in September on charges that he had assaulted the 10-year-old daughter of his live-in girlfriend sexually.

Lancaster said in September that the fact that Towle was living in a family situation with the woman and her young daughter is a major breach of trust.

“All sexual assaults are heinous,” Lancaster said at the time. “When there is a family unit and there is a trust within the family unit, it is really egregious when you violate that family trust.”

Towle will be on lifetime supervision when he is released from prison and must register as a sex offender for the rest of his life.

Also recently, Leal’s investigation into allegations of sexual assaults on another girl, a 9-year-old, in Palmyra, led him to Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, where he questioned David Freeman, 58, of Palmyra, who initially had denied the allegations and then fled the state.

The girl said she had been assaulted sexually by Freeman, who was her mother’s boyfriend.

On July 11, Freeman returned to Maine and met with Leal at the Somerset County Sheriff’s Office. Freeman ultimately confessed to assaulting the girl sexually at their home in Palmyra.

Freeman has been charged formally with three counts of class A gross sexual assault. He is being held at the Somerset County Jail in East Madison in lieu of \$25,000 cash bail.

Lancaster said Leal works closely with the Kennebec and Somerset County Children's Advocacy Center and has developed a strong working relationship with the Somerset County District Attorney's Office, resulting in multiple convictions. Some convictions, such as Towle's, have led to long prison sentences.

"This strong partnership with the Somerset County District Attorney's Office coupled with Detective Leal's skills has improved the Somerset County Sheriff's Office ability to be more effective, bring these offenders to justice, and to take them off of the streets of Somerset County," Lancaster said Wednesday.

District Attorney Maeghan Maloney agrees.

"There are not enough positive words to describe the work of Detective Leal," Maloney said Wednesday in an email. "His tenacity and dedication to victims has resulted in many successful prosecutions where sexual assault criminals are being sentenced to decades in prison. This would not be possible without the work of Detective Leal."

Freeman is scheduled to appear for arraignment Sept. 19 in Somerset County Unified Court in Skowhegan.

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