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FIRE INSPECTOR FACING NET CHILD PORN CHARGE

MARGARET BAKER / THE SUN HERALD

BILOXI --- A Gulfport fire inspector out of jail Thursday on a \$25,000 bond is accused of using the Internet to transmit sexually explicit pictures of children.

Biloxi police arrested Alton Bruce Allen Jr., 37, of Gulfport, on Wednesday night and charged him with sexual exploitation of children. If convicted, he could get up to 20 years in prison and \$100,000 in fines. Allen joined the Gulfport Fire Department in September 1999 as a fire inspector. He was placed on administrative leave without pay Thursday. Fire Chief James White said Allen will remain on leave unless he chooses to resign or is found not guilty of any wrongdoing. "If this is true, we are very shocked because he was a very bright and very intelligent individual," White said Thursday. "We are shocked and we are upset; we are very upset about this whole deal."

Allen's arrest, police said, stemmed from an undercover investigation targeting people who use the Internet to transmit child pornography. Allen is accused of exploiting more than one child, although police would not say how many children or identify their ages because of the pending charge.

Allen is among at least a dozen other people who have been arrested over the last two years on similar charges involving Internet transmissions of children posing in nude scenes.

Attorney says police sent porn

Police arrested Allen two days after his computer and other items were seized from his home on East Park Drive in Gulfport. **Wayne Woodall**, Allen's attorney, said police also took videotapes, guns, knives, floppy disks and a laptop computer during the search.

Woodall said Allen is not guilty of anything. In fact, he said, a Biloxi police detective actually initiated the contact after meeting Allen over the Internet in a sexually explicit chat room.

Woodall said the detective was the one who first sent a picture of a naked girl, believed to be 17 years old, to Allen. He said Allen simply opened the document that was e-mailed to him.

"He had no knowledge that they were going to send him sexually explicit pornography," **Woodall** said. "It is a clear case of overreaching by law enforcement, once again, in our opinion."

"And if the law enforcement officer first sent the pornography over the Internet, then I don't understand why he wasn't arrested."

Biloxi police, who headed the investigation, have not said what was found on Allen's computer or how many children were involved.

The investigation started around Aug. 17 after Allen started chatting unknowingly with the undercover Biloxi police officer.

Woodall said Allen realized fairly quickly that he was communicating with a police officer. "The Biloxi detective initiated the e-mail," **Woodall** said "and then he tried to get Mr. Allen to meet him. (Allen) pretty much knew it was somebody in law enforcement."

Police still refuse to talk about the evidence. But it was enough for police officers to get a search warrant for Allen's home and then an arrest warrant.

Co-workers surprised by charge

Allen's arrest surprised employees throughout Gulfport, including at the city's Department of Urban Development, where he had worked for nearly two years before transferring to the Fire Department.

Assistant Fire Chief Mike Bass said he still can't believe one of his employees is accused of such a crime.

"A guy can come in here and be sharp as a tack, and you don't know personal things about him," Bass said. "But I would have never expected anything like this."

**Margaret Baker can be reached at 896-2322 or at mbbaker@sunherald.com