

# *Youth Parole Officer Kept Job Amid Child Abuse Investigation*

**By The Associated Press**

Feb. 5, 2020 Updated 9:18 a.m. ET

CONCORD, N.H. — A former employee of a New Hampshire youth detention center continued working with children in a state job for nine months after police began investigating allegations that he held a boy down while colleagues raped him in 1998.

James Woodlock went on leave from his position as a juvenile probation and parole officer in November 2017, well after David Meehan told police he had been abused in the 1990s at what was then called the Youth Development Center in Manchester, the state's only juvenile detention center, the state attorney general's office told The Associated Press.

The attorney general's office is investigating. Woodlock, who hasn't been charged criminally, declined to comment when a reporter visited his home.

Officials won't say whether his leave is voluntary, whether he is being paid or what, if any, action they took before he went on leave. They also won't say when they learned of the allegations, though law enforcement officials said that in general, such notifications happen as soon as possible unless a delay is crucial to protect the investigation.

All that should be part of the attorney general's investigation, said Lyn Schollett, executive director of the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.

"The prospect that an abusive adult continued to work with children for decades is incredibly alarming," she said. "It speaks to the need for ongoing training and oversight of any institution where children live."

As a juvenile probation and parole officer, Woodlock would have supervised paroled youths, conducted presentencing investigations and monitored parental compliance with

court orders, according to a posted job description. Such officers also have the authority to arrest youths who violate the law or are fugitives.

Four months after his initial leave, Woodlock resumed work with the same job title, but in an administrative office at the Division of Children, Youth and Families, which oversees the detention center. The state would not say whether that role involved work with children.

He went out on leave again July 23, a day after two former counselors at the center were indicted on dozens of rape charges, and two days before the state attorney general's office announced a broad criminal investigation into the center's staff and operations from 1990 to 2000.

Kate Spiner, a spokeswoman for the office of Attorney General Gordon MacDonald, confirmed Woodlock's employment status and said he is among the defendants in a class-action lawsuit filed Jan. 11 that alleges decades of abuse at the facility.

The state is "undertaking a full-scale investigation to ensure justice is served," Gov. Chris Sununu told the AP.

“While the state’s personnel rules prohibit us from talking about individual cases, the Attorney General has assured me the Department of Justice will leave no stone unturned to get to the bottom of every single allegation,” Sununu, a Republican, said in an email.

It's unclear when Woodlock left the Youth Development Center job and became a juvenile probation and parole officer, but publicly available payroll records indicate he has been in the latter position since at least 2009. Five years ago, he was among six state workers nominated for an award for “Exemplary Leadership and Service in Juvenile Justice.”

But that’s not how Meehan remembers him.

Meehan, who spent four years at the center starting in 1995 when he was 14, alleges that Woodlock participated in beating him, held him down during rapes and told him he had “simply misunderstood events” when he spoke up during a group counseling session.

“It is frightening to know that this man has been continuously employed by the state and working with this vulnerable population of children since Mr. Meehan left YDC in 1999,” said Meehan's attorney, Rus Rilee.

Meehan, now 38, is the lead plaintiff in the lawsuit targeting Woodlock, the two former counselors facing criminal charges, three other former workers, the detention center itself and the agencies overseeing it. His attorneys represent 35 other men and women who say they were the abused as children by male and female staffers from 1982 to 2014.

Rilee declined to say whether their allegations also involve Woodlock.

“Any allegations made by my other clients against Mr. Woodlock are part of the ongoing criminal investigation,” he said.

The center, established in the 1850s as a “house of reformation,” is now called the Sununu Youth Services Center, after former Gov. John H. Sununu, father of the current governor. Though its population has dropped to about 30 residents in recent years, it once held upward of 100 children and has come under regular scrutiny over the years.

A lawsuit alleging overcrowding in the 1980s led to rules requiring youths to be released before completing their treatment plans in order to make room for new residents.

In the mid-1990s, the center paid thousands of dollars in fines for violating the terms of that settlement.

In 2000 and 2001, the Division of Children, Youth and Families spent seven months investigating 25 complaints of abuse and neglect at the center, including a boy who said he lost the tip of his finger when staff members slammed a door on it and others who accused staff members of wrapping boys' heads in towels and slamming them against pool tables. It concluded teens had been abused in five of the cases.

Former Rep. Patricia Dowling, who led the House Children and Family Committee, remembers the allegations of physical abuse, including a staffer putting a hard ball in a sock and using it to hit a teenager.

“I never heard the word sexual abuse. I heard physical abuse, mental abuse, but never, ever sexual abuse,” said Dowling, a Republican from Derry.

Joe Diament, who served as commissioner of the Department of Youth and Development Services from 2001 to 2004, said in an interview that previous leaders had good intentions but were running the facility like an adult prison.

He abolished practices such as having the teens wear orange clothing like adult prisoners and handcuffing them when they moved between buildings, and he oversaw efforts to redesign the facility.

Acknowledging there was “a little too much manhandling” by staff before he took over, he said the number of complaints about physical violence dropped after he made it very clear he wouldn't tolerate it.

“It’s certainly not inconceivable that some of that stuff happened over time, but it’s an awfully long period of time and it looks like someone’s just casting a wide net,” he said in a phone interview. “I’m not saying it didn’t happen, but during my tenure none of those concerns came to my desk. And none of them appeared in the system we set up with an ombudsman.”

More recently, the Disability Rights Center, an advocacy group, has conducted investigations into the use of force and restraints at the facility. In 2018, it alleged that staff at the center routinely violated state law in using dangerous face-down restraint methods, including breaking the arm of a 14-year-old boy with severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

State officials called those allegations unfounded and irresponsible, but they ring true to Michael Sanborn, of Claremont, who had a 14-year-old foster son who was sent to the Youth Development Center in 1999.

He never heard any allegations of sexual abuse but remembers typing up a list of 18 incidents he witnessed during visits or heard about from his son that would have cost him his foster care license.

“Whenever they went into the rooms to search them, they used to have to face the wall, and if you turned around — my guy was a nervous kid — as soon as he did they’d slam him against the wall,” Sanborn said in a phone interview.

Boys who were locked in their rooms urinated out the windows when they weren’t allowed to use the bathroom. During one visit, he noticed boys walking around in their underwear. “If they give them pants, they’ll run away,” he said his son told him.

Sanborn has lost touch with his former foster son, but not the memories of his mistreatment.

“You’ve touched on some anger that will never go away,” he said.