

DCF to review personnel records
Bill Cotterell

By Bill Cotterell

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The head of the Department of Children and Families, "horrified and shocked" by the arrest of his agency spokesman on child-pornography charges, Monday ordered a review of personnel records for all DCF employees.

DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth and Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner Gerald Bailey briefed reporters at DCF headquarters about the arrest of Al Zimmerman on eight counts of soliciting two boys for sexual purposes.

Butterworth, who fired Zimmerman last Friday, said he sent a message to all department employees - urging them to "work with your heads held high" - and said the incident does not reflect on DCF's work in protecting children in foster care, the elderly and other needy Floridians.

"There are certain things you can't prepare for. I guarantee you, this is one thing I never expected to occur," he said. "It is one person who committed, I believe, a horrific act - a horrific act - and therefore not only victimized his victims, but victimized this department, the media and the 13,500 people who work here."

Butterworth and Bailey said one of the two teenage boys in the Zimmerman case had been in DCF care. Bailey said "there were indications" that Zimmerman might have met a boy through agency services, but both men declined to go into details for fear of giving any information that might identify one of the victims even by inference.

Butterworth said Zimmerman had no access to DCF computer systems.

Bailey, representing Attorney General Bill McCollum at the briefing, said the FBI has seized Zimmerman's office and home computers, to see if he distributed any child pornography.

Bailey said "there are indications that at least one victim was met through his job" but that Zimmerman's access to DCF records "was limited."

"I know of two victims at this point. There may be others," said Bailey. "That's what the continuing investigation will confirm or deny."

He credited the Tampa Police Department, FBI and McCollum's office for working with FDLE in the case. Bailey also said DCF gave "complete and open cooperation."

Butterworth said the DCF personnel staff will first check records of all employees hired under the new policy to make sure required background checks and fingerprints are on file. Then they will check everyone else.

"After we do all those after 2006, November, we will go backwards and hand-go-through each and every file of the 13,500 employees to make sure that everything there is also there as required by policy," he said. "I want to make sure that our policies are being followed in all cases. I want to make sure the background check is there in the file."

Butterworth said DCF policies before November of 2006 did not require fingerprinting of employees. Zimmerman, a former TV newsman in the Tampa Bay area, was hired in 2005 and Butterworth said that although he had "glowing endorsements" from two references - public-information aides for a police agency and a fire department - none of his former employers was contacted.