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Inmate claims he was sexually abused by Tangipahoa employee while on work release; lawsuit filed

BY EMMA KENNEDY | STAFF WRITER
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A Tangipahoa Parish inmate is suing the Sheriff's Office and parish government, claiming he was sexually abused by a parish employee who was supervising him during a work release assignment.

The inmate says the parish and jail failed to have policies in place to prevent such abuse, to train work release supervisors and to report

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The lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Louisiana, in late June.

The lawsuit claims parish worker James France requested the inmate be moved from his assignment at the jail specifically to the road crew to be under his supervision in June 2019.

The inmate claims in the lawsuit that France carried out the sexual abuse while he worked on the road crew. The suit also says France threatened to have him removed from the program or face other sanctions such as additional jail time.

France has since been charged with malfeasance in office and sexual battery for an incident on Aug. 4, 2019. Documents detailing the allegations against him are filed under seal in the 21st Judicial District Court records, but a grand jury indicted France on the charges in October and the criminal case is ongoing.

Parish President Robby Miller and Tangipahoa Parish Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Dawn Panepinto declined to comment on the pending civil litigation.

The inmate's lawsuit claims that France had no training or supervision in his "unfettered access to and control over" the plaintiff and others he was supervising.

There was no policy or procedure in place to ensure France could safely supervise inmates, that he was familiar with the Prison Rape Elimination Act, that he was screened for fitness to supervise inmates and that a system was in place to report improper conduct, the suit claims.

When asked about the policies in place to report work release issues, Panepinto said "there are multiple ways for inmates to report sexual misconduct."

She said the jail maintains PREA compliance and follows state laws on inmate labor outside of the jail facility.