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## Lawsuit claims abuse in La. jail; attorney likens prison to Abu Ghraib

By Jeff Adelson  
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ST. TAMMANY, La. — A contractor and former law enforcement officer has filed a federal lawsuit accusing St. Tammany Parish deputies of holding him in jail for four months in conditions his attorney likened to Abu Ghraib, the notorious prison in Iraq.

Norman J. Manton Jr. of Covington was arrested in January 2008 during an investigation into the disappearance of Albert Bloch, 61, of Jefferson Parish. Charges against Manton, a former Covington police officer and deputy, were later dropped.

Bloch has not been found.

Manton's suit, which seeks \$3.25 million in compensatory and punitive damages, alleges that deputies coerced a witness into connecting Manton to the case. In jail, he was denied medical treatment, held in isolation and beaten by other inmates, according to the suit.

"If what's in that petition is true, and I have no reason to believe it isn't, it's worse than Abu Ghraib," said Douglas Howard, a New Orleans attorney representing Manton.

Sheriff Jack Strain and Chuck Hughes, an attorney who represents the Sheriff's Office, said Manton's allegations are without merit, and Strain questioned Manton's credibility.

"From the few things I did read, Mr. Manton has a pretty vivid imagination," Strain said. "I challenge you to look at his past and his credibility and look at how many people have accused him of dishonest behavior," the sheriff said, referring to a string of lawsuits alleging improper business dealings.

Manton's suit, filed in January, names as defendants Strain, several deputies and jail officials from the Sheriff's Office, St. Tammany Parish government, the Louisiana Sheriffs Association, J.P. Morgan Chase Bank and the insurance companies for the Sheriff's Office and the bank.

The suit alleges that deputies told a clerk at a Chase Bank in Covington to identify Manton as a man who tried to cash one of Bloch's checks after Bloch's disappearance. Manton was held on suspicion of access device fraud and was denied bail because he was on probation, according to the suit.

Once in jail, Manton was denied food for several days on two occasions, initially was held in a cell without bathroom facilities or room enough to sleep, and was denied heart medication, according to the suit. He later was moved to an isolation cell, where he was again denied medications and was unable to get treatment for four days after a spider bit his leg, causing it to swell several times its normal size, the suit says.

After Manton was moved into the jail's general population, 93 days later, Warden Mike Core allegedly told other inmates Manton was a former police officer and he was attacked as a result, the suit says.

Charges against Manton were dropped in May and he was released.

In 2006, Manton pleaded no contest to charges of theft of more than \$500 and of failing to properly use funds he received as a contractor and was sentenced to five years of probation and required to pay \$13,000 in restitution.

He has been the defendant in more than 30 civil suits in St. Tammany Parish, most of which were for alleged failure to make payments, according to records from the clerk of court.

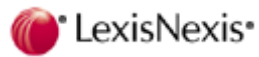
Strain defended the conditions at the St. Tammany jail and said it has improved since he took office. "There are far

fewer . . . accusations, and I would say I don't remember the last one founded" in fact, Strain said. "With 12,000 to 15,000 prisoners a year coming through the jail, we have never been found to have violated anyone's civil rights."

The Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office is still investigating Bloch's disappearance, Col. John Fortunato said. Some of Bloch's possessions were found in the possession of Mark Hebert, 44, of Covington, a former Jefferson Parish deputy who was sentenced to three years in prison for allegedly stealing from motorists he had stopped.

Hebert has not been charged in connection with Bloch's disappearance. Manton was originally connected to the case when Hebert went to his home seeking help finding a lawyer and money while he was under investigation, according to the suit.

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