



PRESS-REGISTER

Tyson charges four new suspects

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Three Bishop State Community College employees are among five people accused of working together to take nearly \$69,000 in financial aid money and Pell grants from the school.

Mobile County District Attorney John Tyson Jr. called a news conference Friday to announce a second round of charges in connection with the Bishop State investigation.

A week earlier, Tyson had announced that two people had been charged with theft by deception.

Four new individuals were charged Friday with theft in connection with financial aid irregularities at Bishop State.

A total of six people now face seven theft charges.

College employees Emma Perkins and Charlotte Powe were charged Friday with first-degree theft by deception. Also charged were Perkins' husband, Alfred Perkins, and son, James Gray Jr.

Tyson also added a second theft charge against Marlene French, a college employee arrested last week in connection with the alleged theft of other financial aid funds. French, who was a cashier in the Mobile college's business office, is on administrative leave.

"We cannot and we will not put up with somebody who is out to, in effect, destroy an institution who represents the only way up and out for so many people in southwest Alabama," Tyson said Friday at the news conference in Mobile's Government Plaza.

Emma Perkins, on leave from her job as an alumni affairs secretary, is accused of taking \$68,967 in financial aid money between January 2002 and September 2006. Her son, her husband and her fellow employees all assisted in taking the money, Tyson said, and each faces charges in association with a lesser amount of it.

Powe, an office administration instructor, is also on leave.

Herb Jordan, a spokesman for Bishop State, said Friday that President Yvonne Kennedy was still on vacation and not available for comment.

"We are saddened by the situation that has happened, and we are praying for all who are involved," Jordan said.

In response to a question, Tyson said that Kennedy's cooperation with county investigators had been "splendid" and said he currently has no evidence linking her to criminal wrongdoing.

"Dr. Kennedy may have misplaced her trust in them, but we have no information that she's engaged in

criminal activities," Tyson said.

French was initially charged along with her ex-husband, Robert Horn, with theft by deception in connection with another \$6,501 of allegedly misused financial aid.

Tyson said he has seen people from the office of Thomas Corts, interim chancellor of Alabama's two-year college system, investigating irregularities at Bishop State, but is not aware of any federal or state investigators on the case.

"We could use some help from the feds, actually," Tyson said.

He expressed concerns that problems with federal aid money could cause the U.S. Department of Education to stop sending money to Bishop State, a move that potentially "threatens the existence of the school."

Some 80 percent of the students at Bishop State receive some form of financial aid.

"We're going to do everything we can to stop this right now," Tyson said. "Interrupt it and protect and preserve the potential of the school to participate in federal monies."

The U.S. Department of Education has already demanded that Bishop State return \$150,000 in aid money following a federal audit of the school's 2003-04 records. It also took the unusual step of requiring the Mobile college to demonstrate a student's eligibility for aid before Bishop State can receive scholarship money.

Many problems were uncovered during a Corts-led inquiry into Bishop State. Those findings were forwarded to Alabama Attorney General Troy King.

King, a Republican appointed in 2004, seeks to retain his post in November. He is opposed by Tyson, a Democrat.

The two-year system review found Bishop State employees doling out money to relatives, improper handling of federal financial aid, irregularities involving athletic scholarships and problems with college academics.

After a Sept. 28 state school board meeting, Corts called the problems at Bishop State "substantial," saying there were many instances of grade changing and falsification and warning that the school could lose millions of federal aid dollars.

Experts also suggested recently that the college's foundation could lose its tax-exempt status because of what Kennedy described as the common practice of donors directing their foundation contributions to go to scholarships for specific students.

Kennedy herself acknowledged directing such a contribution to her niece, but said she didn't think there was anything wrong with the practice.

Three Republicans on the state's nine-member school board have called on Kennedy to step down because of problems at the 4,000-plus-student college.

Kennedy has refused to resign or retire, however, and the state school board did not discuss her removal at its last meeting.

Kennedy, a Democrat, is also a state legislator who represents parts of Mobile in the House.

While Tyson said he did not yet have enough evidence to make further arrests, he emphasized that investigators were still looking into the situation at Bishop State.

"The investigation is ongoing," he said. "We're not through. I would say that we're not anywhere close to being through."

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