

State attorney defers charges against former priest

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WINTER HAVEN — The St. Lucie County State Attorney's Office has deferred charges against the former pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, with a provision he agrees to counseling for one year, records show.

The **Rev. Eamon O'Dowd** was arrested in Seminole County in September 1983 on charges he fondled a 12-year-old girl. His case was later transferred to St. Lucie County because of a conflict of interest with the Seminole County State Attorney's Office.

According to courthouse records, St.

Lucie County Assistant State Attorney John E. Finley agreed Wednesday to defer prosecution against **O'Dowd**, providing the former Winter Haven priest follows a one-year treatment program.

Finley was unavailable for comment Friday.

The deferral agreement requires that **O'Dowd** enter a residential treatment program for at least 60 days, records show, and that he enter the program within 30 days.

After the 60-day period, **O'Dowd** is required to submit to a doctor's evaluation and treatment on a regular basis for at least one year, or until the doctor rules treatment is no longer necessary, records show.

O'Dowd will not be allowed to accept

an assignment as a parish priest until a physician rules such a post would not longer be inadvisable, records show.

O'Dowd surrendered to Seminole County authorities Sept. 7, after a warrant was issued for his arrest on charges he committed lewd and lascivious acts against a child.

A Seminole County State Attorney's Office spokesman said then the girl's family knew **O'Dowd** when he was assistant pastor at an Orlando church, before he came to Winter Haven in 1982.

Two assaults reportedly were committed in January 1983, the spokesman said, and the girl's mother reported the incidents three months later. The girl's mother reported that **O'Dowd** fondled her daughter's breasts, the spokesman said.

A Seminole County spokesman said the case was transferred to St. Lucie County because the Seminole County State Attorney's Office hired a lawyer who once worked for **O'Dowd's** attorney.

O'Dowd resigned from his church post in December 1983, and told parishioners in an emotional letter he was not guilty of the charges.

"My resignation and departure obviously are not to be seen as an admission of guilt," he said in the letter, which was printed in a church bulletin. "On the contrary, I expect to be acquitted of these charges. However, this will take months yet. I feel it is not fair to hold this over your head for that length of time."

O'Dowd was unavailable for comment Friday.