

Suspect arrested in serial prostitute killings

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By John Diedrich of the Journal Sentinel

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Milwaukee police have arrested a 49-year-old man in connection with the killing of at least six prostitutes over 21 years in the city, according to sources familiar with the investigation.

The suspect, Walter E. Ellis of Milwaukee, was arrested at noon Saturday at a hotel in Franklin by a swarm of police officers, the sources said. A witness confirmed a large number of officers descended on the hotel for an arrest.

Ellis was booked on a temporary felony warrant and was being questioned Sunday by detectives in the Milwaukee police Prisoner Processing Section, the sources said.

Police Chief Edward Flynn and District Attorney John Chisholm are expected to provide more information on the investigation Monday. Neither was available for comment Sunday.

Police spokeswoman Anne E. Schwartz said a suspect was being interviewed.

"Milwaukee police have a person of interest in custody who we are talking to regarding a number of cold case homicides," Schwartz said. "More information will be provided by Chief Flynn and D.A. Chisholm at a news conference Monday."

Ellis' DNA has been found on at least seven females killed between 1986 and 2007, the sources said. Police officials have said they think someone else killed one of those victims, a white 16-year-old runaway whose throat was slashed. The other victims, all prostitutes and African-American, were strangled.

The State Crime Laboratory also has been processing DNA found on two dozen slain prostitutes to see if there is a match with Ellis. The seven killings occurred in an area roughly bounded by N. King Drive, N. 27th St., W. North Ave. and W. Capitol Drive. One victim was found in the Menomonee River, but authorities believe she was killed elsewhere.

Court records show Ellis once lived close to the area where many of the homicides occurred.

Ellis was criminally charged 12 times between 1981 and 1998 for violent and property crimes, according to online court records.

Ellis' last felony conviction was in 1998. Ellis was sentenced to five years in prison for recklessly endangering safety, according to court records. Further details of that case were not available. Of the seven victims who have been linked to Ellis, none was killed between

1998 and 2006.

There also was a gap between 1987 and 1994. Online records show Ellis was released from federal prison in December 1992. Details about that case were not available Sunday.

Authorities announced in May they had discovered that a serial killer was murdering prostitutes in Milwaukee over two decades and typically was dumping their bodies in vacant houses.

A task force of local, state and federal law enforcement was convened and in three months it received 193 tips, Flynn said last month. Some suspects were interviewed and ruled out, he said.

Flynn also revealed last month that his department was receiving assistance from Britain's National Policing Improvement Agency with experience in serial murder investigations and cases that relied heavily on DNA evidence.

The chief said matching DNA found at a crime scene or on a victim's body to a person would not necessarily mean the investigation is complete.

"The fact that someone's DNA was there or not there by itself doesn't solve the case," Flynn said in August. "It gives us a terrific lead."