

Man pleads guilty to sexual assault

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Willie Smalls, 59, pleaded guilty Wednesday to first-degree criminal sexual conduct with a minor, and Circuit Judge Thomas Hughston sentenced him to 20 years in prison.

Ninth Circuit Solicitor Scarlett Wilson said a new state law aimed at repeat sex offenders helped do justice in the case by making it easier to prosecute and by increasing the sentencing range from up to 20 years to 10 to 30 years in prison.

"The statute gives us more leverage in prosecuting repeat offenders in these cases, which have such fragile victims," she said.

Managing Assistant Solicitor Debbie Herring-Lash presented evidence to Hughston that the victim, an 11-year-old girl, told her mother that Smalls assaulted her between March and August 2008. Smalls, who dated a family friend, occasionally took the girl shopping and later to his home, where he repeatedly sexually assaulted her, according to the evidence.

North Charleston police arrested Smalls in November 2008.

Herring-Lash said the victim is pleased to have the case behind her and glad that Smalls will be punished.

After his term ends, Smalls will be evaluated under the Sexually Violent Predator Act, she said.

Smalls previously was convicted of criminal sexual conduct with a minor in 1994, and also had convictions for passing fraudulent checks and criminal domestic violence, the Solicitor's Office said.

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