

Former branch manager accused of taking \$15K from employer

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Published: Thursday, February 6, 2014 at 4:01 p.m.

A branch manager accused of stealing \$15,000 from his former employer was charged Wednesday with grand theft.

Russell Lee Morgan, 36, was arrested and taken to the Marion County Jail.

Detective Aaron Levy investigated the case. According to his report, a deputy was told last month by the office manager at United Water Restoration Group Inc. that Morgan, who was the manager of the company's Ocala branch, had fraudulently stolen \$15,000 from the business. The manager said the theft was discovered after the books were reviewed for November 2013 and showed that Morgan was turning in referrals for jobs that did not exist.

Company officials said that when plumbers come across a customer with extensive water damage that would require restoration services, they refer them to the company and receive an \$800 referral fee if the customer agrees to hire the company. Morgan's job was to withdraw the money and pay the plumbers.

Morgan was confronted by the operations manager, who said Morgan admitted making fraudulent referrals and receiving cash for them because he "has a drug problem and was in the hole," the report states. At that point Morgan was fired from his position.

Levy talked with Morgan on the phone, and Morgan said someone had burglarized his vehicle and that \$4,800 in cash that belonged to the company was stolen. The money was supposed to pay plumbers for referrals. He said he was planning to pay the plumbers from other referrals and was willing to reimburse the company if given a chance. Morgan told the detective he did not report his vehicle was burglarized, the report notes.

Morgan agreed to meet with the detective, but the detective later received a call from Morgan's lawyer, Christian Straile, who said his client would not be meeting him.

Morgan was released from the jail late Wednesday on \$2,000 bail. When reached by phone Thursday, he declined to comment and referred questions to Straile.

Straile said he plans to file a plea of not guilty on behalf of his client, who is denying the allegation.

State records show Morgan was released from prison in February 2006 after serving time for burglary, grand theft and trafficking in stolen property. He has a status conference set for May on charges of possession of cocaine and drug paraphernalia.

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