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SF police waited 2 months before drug lab probe

By TERRY COLLINS, Associated Press Writer

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(03-15) 18:04 PDT San Francisco, CA (AP) --

The sister of a former San Francisco crime lab technician warned the lab that she feared her sibling might be stealing cocaine used as evidence, police said Monday.



Police acknowledged that Deborah Madden's sister told crime lab officials of Madden's suspected use of evidence two months before police launched an official investigation of Madden in February.

"Yes, it did come to the police department's attention earlier," Sgt. Lyn Tomioka, a police spokeswoman, said Monday. "Yes, she did have concerns about her sister and possible use of evidence and that's part of our investigation."

The San Francisco Chronicle reported Monday that Madden's sister found an apparent lab vial of cocaine at Madden's San Mateo home in mid-December. Madden was undergoing alcohol rehabilitation at the time.

The sister contacted the police lab and her account was detailed in a memo by Madden's boss, Lois Woodworth. The memo was not sent to Police Chief George Gascon for unknown reasons.

Last week, Gascon admitted that "a mistake" also was made by not disclosing to the district attorney and public defender's offices that Madden was convicted of misdemeanor domestic assault in 2008.

During a recent search of her home, police discovered a gun and small amounts of a "white powdery substance" believed to be cocaine, Gascon said.

"We're working real hard to determine what happened and what is missing," Tomioka said. "We're not going to rush. We want to do it right the first time.

"Unfortunately, it's another hurdle for the chief to overcome."

Public Defender Jeff Adachi said Monday he believes not telling his office and the District Attorney about the concerns raised by Madden's sister was intentional and jeopardizes hundreds of drug-related cases.

"It just shows that police knew that the technician was taking drugs," Adachi said. "This was a major red flag for the police. This is a star witness for the prosecution who would testify almost daily for them.

"What should've happened is as soon as they learned that evidence was being removed, they should've immediately shut the lab down and done some type of review," Adachi continued.

Madden, 60, took a leave of absence after a crime lab audit in December revealed drug evidence was missing. She retired March 1 after a 29-year career as a criminalist. She has not been arrested and no charges have been filed in the case.

Meanwhile, prosecutors said they hope to have drug testing for pending court cases back on track by the end of the week.

Assistant District Attorney Brian Buckelew said Monday that about 120 cases have been dropped since drug testing halted at the city's crime lab last week amid Madden's allegations.

Other Bay Area crime labs are now handling the testing.

A San Francisco judge has given prosecutors until Friday to retest drug samples in 35 pending cases. Buckelew said prosecutors hope to have those cases and others ready at that time.

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