

Another county investigating 'recruiter' in possible human trafficking case

Robeson County has long-term investigation of couple charged in Alamance County; Johnson seeks information on juvenile girls who vanished



5/17/16 - Alamance County Sheriff Terry Johnson speaks with the media Tuesday in Gr... [+]

By [Natalie Allison Janicello](#)

Times-News

Posted May. 17, 2016 at 11:05 am Updated at 10:05 AM

GRAHAM -- As he prepared for a news conference Tuesday morning, Sheriff Terry Johnson took a call from the Robeson County District Attorney's Office.

On the other end was Eric Hackney, an investigator with information that suddenly made Johnson's investigation into Aris Hines even larger: Not only had Hines been involved in the recruitment of teenagers to bogus basketball academies in other states, but he has been under investigation for two-and-a-half years related to a similar case in North Carolina.

After seeing the Times-News' story on Hines' arrest and Johnson's related human trafficking investigation, Hackney relayed information to him about Hines recruiting and keeping 18 kids in a house in Pembroke after allegedly taking thousands of dollars from each on a promise he would provide them with educations and athletic career prospects.

"There's no telling what schemes he has done over the years in his effort to get people to pay him money for promises that never came to fruition," Hackney told the Times-News. "He is a

professional scam artist. I don't know how else to say it. He is a professional scam artist that never produces what he promises.”

Beyond allegedly scamming countless other families, Johnson said, the Alamance County Sheriff's Office believes Aris Lamont Hines, 37, and his fiancé Brandi Kaulani Thomason, 32, of 718 Blue Lake Drive, Mebane, could be part of a larger human trafficking organization involving the recruitment of foreign students to the United States to go to nonexistent private schools and play sports.

Such was the case with a ninth-grade Nigerian student whom Johnson said was recruited by Hines to attend Evelyn Mack Academy in Charlotte, but who was never taken there and was enrolled by Thomason at Woodlawn Middle School and subsequently Eastern Alamance High School using allegedly falsified documents.

Both Hines and Thomason were charged with two counts each of felony obtaining property by false pretense and obstruction of justice, held initially under a \$3 million bond until a judge reduced their bonds to \$10,000 in a hearing Monday. The pair was released from jail on bond Monday night. Neither has been charged in connection to human trafficking.

Johnson said Tuesday that while deputies executed a search warrant at Hines' and Thomason's Blue Lake Drive residence as part of the investigation into the falsified documents, authorities discovered another young Nigerian man, a 7-foot-5-inch 18-year-old. He wasn't attending school locally, though reportedly was also supposed to be attending Evelyn Mack Academy.

Johnson and Capt. Jackie Fortner said authorities believe there were possibly five children living with Hines and Thomason, first at 701 W. Holt St. and then to the Blue Lake Drive residence after the couple moved.

“We know they've got someone over in these foreign countries, which is typical of human trafficking, that is handling the situation over there, shipping them, Hines receives them, then Hines disperses them wherever he can.”

The sheriff's office is still trying to identify and locate three young females in particular, whom they say Hines and Thomason tried to enroll in the Alamance-Burlington School System in August but who were turned away for not having the proper documents.

“They denied any knowledge whatsoever of attempting to register three females in the Alamance-Burlington School System,” Johnson said of Hines and Thomason. “This causes me, folks, grave concern for where these young ladies are at. The Alamance County Sheriff's Office has created a department-wide task force and currently are pursuing all leads. I've given my officers permission to go wherever the leads take them.”

Johnson said the sheriff's office is now working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, State Bureau of Investigation, U.S. State Department and both Alamance and Robeson county district attorney's offices.

“Our agency will not stop until we locate the three girls that we know exist that was tried to be registered with the Alamance-Burlington School System and has since evaporated from Alamance County,” Johnson said. “We don't know where they're at, but we're trying to locate them.”

To make their task harder, Johnson said authorities have a description of only one of the females, based on what the school system could provide to them. She is a 14- or 15-year-old from the Dominican Republic.

Investigators are asking members of the public who may have seen Hines and Thomason with any other young people to contact the Alamance County Sheriff's Office.

"Hopefully there are some citizens that have seen these two individuals with these young girls and maybe have some idea where the girls are today," he said.

INVESTIGATORS IN ALAMANCE County are still trying to determine if Hines and Thomason received money from or paid money to the family of the student who was attending Eastern Alamance.

In Robeson County, Hackney found that Hines was making money off the young people he brought to Pembroke.

Hackney's investigation actually began as — and continues to be — one concerning voter fraud in November 2013.

At that time, there were 18 students living in one house in Pembroke, whom Hines had recruited to attend a school he called Riverside Christian Academy, though none did.

They each paid him \$3,500 to come, Hackney said one of the young men told him, as well as \$250 in monthly rent to live in the cramped housing situation.

The students were promised an opportunity to complete a GED or high school equivalency program, as well as receive assistance in being placed in college or professional sports programs.

During the 2013 municipal election, the 18 students were brought in two vans to the Board of Election building in Lumberton during the early voting period, and when a candidate present during the voting challenged the first van load of students' legal standing to vote, all 18 and their drivers left.

Because only half of them voted, Hackney only received information on nine of the young men, all of whom were from other states around the country. Of those, he was only able to talk to three, and those individuals confirmed law enforcement's suspicion that Hines' sports programs aren't entirely legitimate.

"If Aris Hines is a coach, then I'm in line as the next NASA space shuttle commander," Hackney said. "There's no telling how many people he has done what he has done to and the money he's made off of innocent kids."

Though Hackney is still working on the voter fraud investigation, he said his primary concern now is assisting Alamance County, local and federal authorities with Johnson's investigation into the location of the female juveniles who were at one point allegedly with Hines and Thomason in Alamance County.

"For the past couple weeks, our officers have worked day and night trying to figure out what all was entailed with this," Johnson said Tuesday in a news conference. "Unfortunately, yesterday, Judge Thomas Lambeth saw fit to reduce the bonds to \$10,000 each even after the district attorney's office opposed a reduction."

Hines' and Thomason's conditions of release requires that they turn in their passports and forbids them from leaving the state without the permission of an Alamance County judge, being around

children to whom they aren't related, being on the premises of Alamance-Burlington School System schools, athletic facilities or at central office and contacting children or schools for the purpose of recruiting or enrolling a child in school.

In the news conference Tuesday, Johnson said he believed Hines and Thomason presented a flight risk.

Lambeth, reached Tuesday by phone, said he was unable to comment on the situation.

"The North Carolina Code of Judicial Conduct prohibits me from commenting on matters that are currently pending, and therefore I can't respond to questions regarding that particular case," Lambeth said.

Johnson said that while he can't speak on behalf ABSS, he imagines employees there will be more alert to potential human trafficking cases.

"I've been in this business, soon to be 45 years, and we're constantly aware of human trafficking but nothing of this magnitude," he said. "It's been an eye-opening experience for them and certainly this department has been hollering about human trafficking for a long time."