

VA gun rampage suspect hit with federal charges

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A man accused of firing shots at employees of the Veterans Affairs hospital in Murfreesboro in October has been arrested on additional federal charges.

Former VA employee Michael Gardner, 50, is accused of entering the Alvin C. York Veterans Affairs Medical Center on Oct. 7 and firing a shotgun at a desk, under which a human resources employee was hiding, and into the door of an unoccupied office, according to authorities. He also is accused of firing at two VA police officers. No one was injured in the incident.

A federal magistrate found probable cause to arrest Gardner on Nov. 10 on criminal complaints that included three counts of attempting to kill a federal employee; three counts of forcibly assaulting and intimidating a federal employee; using, possessing and discharging a firearm while committing a federal crime; and taking a firearm into a federal facility, with the intent to use it in the commission of a crime, court records show.

A formal federal indictment against Gardner has not yet been issued. State charges of attempted murder, aggravated burglary, reckless endangerment and possession of a weapon while committing a felony are still pending against Gardner, who was transferred from the Rutherford County Jail into federal custody. In the weeks leading up to the incident, Gardner was under an administrative investigation at work, the nature of which VA officials did not disclose.

Gardner, who supervised cleaning staff at the VA, where he worked for 18 years, was also a patient at the hospital.

Gardner's defense will be looking closely at the medical and psychological care he was receiving from the hospital, his attorney David Raybin said. Raybin said the administrative investigation was probably a precipitating event, but not the only cause of the incident.

VA spokeswoman Molly Reynolds said yesterday that she could not comment on the medical treatment Gardner was receiving or the nature of the administrative investigation.

A mental evaluation of Gardner by Vanderbilt University Medical Center doctors began yesterday, Raybin said. U.S. Attorney Trey Hester, who is prosecuting the case, said he could not talk about case specifics. It is normal practice in cases where there may be mental health issues to get opinions from local experts and then from doctors at a federal facility, he said.

Once the mental evaluations, which are expected to take weeks to months, are completed, "we'll be in a position to decide where to go with the case," Raybin said.

A foot-deep stack of Gardner's medical records have to be waded through by the Vanderbilt doctors and doctors chosen by prosecutors, Raybin said.

Meanwhile, supporters from the community, who set up a fund at Rutherford Bank and Trust to help with Gardner's legal defense, continue to rally to "Big Mike's" aid.

They are still collecting donations at the gym and outdoor store Gardner frequented and proudly display bumper stickers and pins proclaiming "Free Mike."

A fund-raising yard sale earlier this month brought in more than \$800, said longtime friend Kathy Green, who is caring for Gardner's 3-year-old Rottweiler, Lacy.

"I talked to him over the weekend," Green said yesterday. "He's doing great. He says he likes the food better" in federal custody.

Robert Hornsby, a former VA doctor who has known Gardner for about 15 years, said the coyote bounty hunter and champion powerlifter's "heart is as big as a pumpkin."

Hornsby has volunteered his skills as a storyteller to help raise money for Gardner if a venue is found.