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Former clerk in Newton's office is charged in \$7,000 theft; loss could hit \$60,000

By CHARLES PATTON
Pasco Times Staff Writer

NEW PORT RICHEY — Karen Patricia Fucaloro, 28, a former deputy clerk in the finance division of the Dade City office of Pasco County Circuit Clerk Miller Newton, was charged Monday with grand larceny in the theft of about \$7,000 in county funds.

The actual amount may exceed \$60,000, The Times learned.

Newton, at a press conference Tuesday morning, said five receipts are missing from the office, indicating that more money could be missing. He declined to comment on the possible total amount other than to say it could be "substantially more" than the initial \$7,000.

THE TIMES learned that a \$52,000 check transferring funds from one county account to another was re-

covered by sheriff's deputies at Mrs. Fucaloro's home Monday night.

Newton said at least \$1,200 of the loss was in cash. The remainder was in checks payable to the Pasco County Board of County Commissioners, and was not negotiable by any individual, he said.

Newton said the entire loss is covered by special insurance and by an employe bond. All the checks are believed to have been recovered.

Mrs. Fucaloro, 306 S 19th St., Zephyrhills, married and the mother of two children, is accused of taking the funds from the county's general fund, road paving assessment and street lighting accounts over a period of five weeks, Newton said.

THE OFFICE of Pasco-Pinellas State Atty. James T. Russell Tuesday issued subpoenas to the head bookkeepers at the Bank of Pasco County, Ellis First National Bank and

First Federal Savings and Loan Association, all of Dade City, instructing the bookkeepers to produce records and signature cards from September 1974 on the Pasco County road and bridge fund checking account and lighting districts and Mrs. Fucaloro's personal accounts.

Mrs. Fucaloro was arrested at her home Monday night after sheriff's deputies searched the home following issuance of a search warrant by Circuit Judge Ray Ulmer. Ulmer issued the warrant on the basis of an affidavit signed by Deputy Sheriff Robert Burroughs.

An advisory hearing for Mrs. Fucaloro was conducted before Ulmer Tuesday morning. She was released on \$7,500 bail after having spent the night in the Pasco County Jail.

NEWTON announced the missing cash and arrest during his press conference Tuesday morning.

He said Mrs. Fucaloro, a Manpower employe, had worked as a deputy clerk for nine months, but was fired last

Thursday by her supervisor, Assistant Finance Director Dennis Widlanski. The termination was based on what Newton called "sloppy work."

He said Mrs. Fucaloro previously had been warned by Widlanski.

The reprimand and subsequent dismissal were the result of her failure to issue receipts and to make bank deposits on the timetable established by his office, Newton said.

He said office policy is to issue receipts and to make the bank deposits within 24 hours after the cash or check is received.

NEWTON SAID at least 70 receipts are involved in the missing funds, most of them for transactions involving west Pasco paving assessment or street lighting projects.

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Charge from Page 1

He said the discovery of the missing money was the result of a routine end-of-the month internal audit conducted by his office. He said that when the routine audit indicated a problem, a complete audit of the section was initiated immediately by his staff.

Newton said that as soon as it was confirmed that funds were missing, the sheriff's department was notified. That agency's investigation was begun last Friday.

Officials of the clerk's office and state attorney's office reportedly worked throughout the weekend on the investigation.

Newton said the audit indicated that Mrs. Fucaloro had handled a maximum of about \$1,500 in cash during the five-week period in question.

"WE ARE extremely concerned about this," Newton said. "I consider the handling of public money a sacred trust."

"This is the first, and, I hope, the last time such an incident will occur during my tenure. There is nothing gratifying about the situation except to know that our system is designed in such a way as to find problems such as this."

He said that, while the investigation is continuing, "there are no indications thus far that any other employes were involved."

Mrs. Fucaloro, represented at the advisory hearing by Dade City attorney William Dayton, earned \$101.62 per week as a county employe.

She formerly was employed at Community General Hospital in Dade City as a bookkeeper and at the University of Tampa as a mail clerk and secretary, Newton said.

HOSPITAL OFFICIALS said there were no employe personnel records available, but they confirmed that she had worked there.

University of Tampa personnel officials said Mrs. Fucaloro worked there from September to December 1973. Her work there was described as "moderately satisfactory."

Newton said both previous employers were checked before Mrs. Fucaloro was hired as a deputy clerk.

Mrs. Fucaloro's husband Leonard J. is a laborer for the Florida Department of Transportation.

MRS. FUCALORO is the second government employe charged in connection with missing funds within the past week in Pasco County. Port Richey City clerk Donna Pavich pleaded guilty to 14 counts of embezzling \$2,046 in city funds during a hearing before Circuit Judge Lawrence Keough last Wednesday.

In a third incident, the Order of St. Benedict at Saint Leo Abbey last Thursday filed suit to recover more than \$200,000 it says was embezzled from the abbey by its former business advisor, Peter Carney.