

S.F. officials locked out of computer network

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(07-14) 19:23 PDT SAN FRANCISCO -- A disgruntled city computer engineer has virtually commandeered San Francisco's new multimillion-dollar computer network, altering it to deny access to top administrators even as he sits in jail on \$5 million bail, authorities said Monday.

Terry Childs, a 43-year-old computer network administrator who lives in Pittsburg, has been charged with four counts of computer tampering and is scheduled to be arraigned today.

Prosecutors say Childs, who works in the Department of Technology at a base salary of just over \$126,000, tampered with the city's new FiberWAN (Wide Area Network), where records such as officials' e-mails, city payroll files, confidential law enforcement documents and jail inmates' bookings are stored.

Childs created a password that granted him exclusive access to the system, authorities said. He initially gave pass codes to police, but they didn't work. When pressed, Childs refused to divulge the real code even when threatened with arrest, they said.

He was taken into custody Sunday. City officials said late Monday that they had made some headway into cracking his pass codes and regaining access to the system.

Childs has worked for the city for about five years. One official with knowledge of the case said he had been disciplined on the job in recent months for poor performance and that his supervisors had tried to fire him.

"They weren't able to do it - this was kind of his insurance policy," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity because the attempted firing was a personnel matter.

Authorities say Childs began tampering with the computer system June 20. The damage is still being assessed, but authorities say undoing his denial of access to other system administrators could cost millions of dollars.

Officials also said they feared that although Childs is in jail, he may have enabled a third party to access the system by telephone or other electronic device and order the destruction of hundreds of thousands of sensitive documents.

Authorities have searched Childs' home and car for a device that could be used in such an attack, but so

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far no such evidence has been found.

As part of his alleged sabotage, Childs engineered a tracing system to monitor what other administrators were saying and doing related to his personnel case, law enforcement officials said.

Childs became the target of suspicions inside the technology agency this year, and the case was referred for police investigation in late June, authorities say.

At a news conference announcing Childs' arrest, District Attorney Kamala Harris was tightlipped about what his motive may have been.

"Motive is not necessarily an element of a crime," Harris said. "This city employee committed four felonies."

She added, "This involves compromising a public system that we rely on. Its integrity has been compromised."

The system continues to operate even though administrators have limited or no access, officials said.

"Right now our system is up and running and we haven't had any problems so far," said Ron Vinson, chief administrative officer for the Department of Technology.

Vinson said the city is "working around the clock" to make sure the system is maintained and operable.

Nathan Ballard, a spokesman for Mayor Gavin Newsom, said the mayor was "confident that (the Department of Technology) is doing everything necessary to maintain the integrity of the city's computer networks."

Childs appeared in court Monday but did not have a lawyer assigned to him.

Childs, according to payroll records, earned \$126,735 in base pay in 2007 and additional premium pay of \$22,534, for a total of \$149,269. Vinson said the extra money was apparently compensation for being on-call as a trouble-shooter.

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