Former area priest sought by police in state of Washington

SPokane, Wash. (AP) — A Catholic priest, suspended by the Diocese of Lafayette in 1983 amid allegations he molested altar boys, has been charged with molesting boys he counseled in a substance abuse unit at Spokane's Deaconess Medical Center.

An arrest warrant was issued for the Rev. Ronald Lane Fontenot, 40, on one count of communicating with a minor for immoral purposes and three counts of simple assault, all misdemeanors, Spokane police said.

Police said they tried to arrest Fontenot Thursday, but were unable to find him.

He had not been arrested as of Monday afternoon.

At least two of the counts involve Fontenot's alleged sexual contact with boys who were patients at the Nancy Reagan Care Unit, a treatment unit for adolescents suffering from alcoholism or drug abuse problems, the Spokesman-Review reported in a copyright story.

Three boys have filed complaints, police said.

Deaconess spokeswoman Judy Scholmer said Fontenot quit as a care-unit technician Jan. 28. He had worked there since last July.

Scholmer said Sunday night she did want to comment until reviewing the charges against Fontenot and discussing the matter with Deaconess officials.

Fontenot does not have a listed phone number.

Ms. Scholmer refused to discuss Fontenot's duties, but the parent of one teen-aged boy who claims Fontenot molested him described Fontenot as one of the youth's counselors.

The 15-year-old boy spent 48 days in the care unit late last summer, and Fontenot was one of the son's closest counselors, the parent said.

"All the kids in the unit liked Fontenot," the parent said. "They called him Huggy Bear."

Gerald Dill, information officer of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lafayette, declined to answer questions about Fontenot.

The priest has been suspended from the diocese and is undergoing psychological treatment, Dill said.

In 1983, allegations were leveled that Fontenot and the Rev. Gilbert Gauhe of the Lafayette Diocese had molested boys over several years.

Gauhe pleaded guilty to 33 criminal counts in October, and admitted to sexually molesting youngsters in hundreds of incidents.

Fontenot was not charged.

But he is named along with Gauhe and the diocese in a separate civil lawsuit seeking several million dollars in damages.

Fontenot was an assistant pastor in Gueydan in 1975 and moved up to become head of spiritual development for the diocese.

He was relieved of duty in 1983 after he was accused of sharing several victims with Gauhe.

A jury in Abbeville Friday ordered the Lafayette Diocese and its insurers to pay one of Gauhe's victims $1.25 million in damages in a different lawsuit involving Gauhe.

In August 1983, Fontenot was sent to the House of Affirmation in Whitingville, Mass., a church-run counseling and treatment center for clerics suffering from substance abuse and other problems.

Fontenot left the House of Affirmation and in January 1985 and moved to the Jesuit House at Gonzaga University here, where he had spent two semesters as a graduate student in 1980.

The Rev. Frank Costello, head of the Gonzaga Jesuit House, said he learned about the Louisiana allegations against Fontenot last June, before Fontenot took the Deaconess position.

Fontenot, who is not a Jesuit, moved from Gonzaga a short time later, Costello said.

Fontenot, who had returned to Spokane on his own, told the Jesuits he was on suspension but didn't say why, Costello said.