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Bail set at \$4 million in child abduction case

A 19-year-old woman charged Thursday night in connection with the abduction of a kindergartner from her West Philadelphia elementary school last month worked at the little girl's day-care program, police said.

Police believe Christina Regusters is the woman dressed in Muslim garb who took the little girl from her Bryant Elementary classroom.

But W. Fred Harrison Jr. - hired today to represent Regusters - disputed the police assertion and said he did not think Regusters was the woman in the video.

"I don't think it's her," Harrison said. "They're different sizes, the woman in the video is larger."

Harrison said Regusters had a preliminary arraignment earlier this afternoon on charges of kidnapping, conspiracy, aggravated assault, rape, and related offenses.

Bail was set at \$4 million and a preliminary hearing was set for March 6 in Family Court, Harrison said.

"All I can tell you is that we will test the evidence in court," Harrison said. "I've heard that there's some DNA evidence but that's about all."

Regusters was one of four people taken into custody Thursday afternoon from a home on the 6200 block of Walton Avenue, where police believe the girl was assaulted before being released at a nearby park.

Harrison said Regusters has only been in Philadelphia for about a year from her home in Maryland and has been living with her aunt, Valerie Regusters, and cousins in the Walton Avenue house.

Harrison said that Regusters had worked for several months at the day-care center near the Bryant elementary school but he did not know anything more about Regusters' prior employment or background.

"The family has been cooperative," Harrison added. "They've had their house searched twice and they've provided DNA. So far, she is the only one charged."

The other three - an adult male, an adult female, and a teenage boy - were released overnight, police said.

"This is the only arrest at this time. The investigation is very much active and ongoing by members of the Special Victims Unit," Philadelphia Police Captain John Darby said at a news conference Thursday night.

Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey told Fox News the others were released because police didn't have sufficient evidence to hold them.

"And that's not to say they're involved directly," Ramsey said. "We don't know. More investigative work has to continue."

Ramsey said a Task Force investigating the girl's abduction will stay together.

""We're not confident that we have this totally wrapped up yet," he told Fox.

There is a \$105,000 reward in the case. Ramsey said investigators have received information from another source that led them to Regusters.

The department assembled the Task Force in early February to assist members of the Special Victims Unit work the case. It includes six detectives, including several from the Major Crimes Unit.

Sources told The Inquirer last week that detectives had brought in three women from the Walton Avenue house for questioning, taking carpet samples for possible DNA matches, as well as a talking a parrot. The bird, a blue and yellow Macaw, remains a key piece of evidence in the case, police said. The girl told police that there was a talking bird in the house and she was threatened that it would peck her eyes out if she made too much noise.

The girl was kidnapped Jan. 14 by a woman in Muslim garb who posed as her mother and signed her out of school. She was found early the next morning, alone, in a nearby Upper Darby playground.

Thomas Kline, the Center City attorney who is representing the girl's mother, said the girl attended the Bryant Elementary School at 6001 Cedar Ave. but was enrolled in an after-school program operated by the Heaven's Little Angels day care center a block away on South 60th Street.

Typically, Kline said, the girl would be picked up at Bryant by day-care workers and taken to the center. There the child would later be picked up by her mother."

Police praised the little girl's courage throughout the investigation. Police have returned to the neighborhood many times with her since the abduction, hoping to jog her memory.

Last week, investigators had the girl walk through the neighborhood with her mother, hoping she would feel more comfortable. That's when the girl recognized the back of the Walton Avenue home. She told investigators her eyes had been covered when she was taken inside the front of the house, but not when she was taken out through the back door in the middle of the night.

Kline, who is representing the mother of the girl, praised investigators today in what he called, "a quickly developing situation," and also remarked on the girl's strength throughout a terrible ordeal.

"The remarkable fact, the single most dramatic fact, is that a brave, precious little girl was able to lead police and investigators through this maze of streets to this location," he said.

The girl is recovering from what Kline called, "devastating and horrible injuries."

"She is resilient, just unbelievable," he said.

Darby said at the Thursday news conference that there had been prior contact between Regusters and the young victim at the day-care program.

Kline said Friday that neither the girl nor her mother recognized Regusters from the day-care program.

Ken Davis, 31, who lives a few doors from the Walton Avenue house, said at least four women lived there, with children. He said men were rarely seen.

Davis said police had been in front of the house for the last week.