

SLAYING SUSPECT PROGRESSED AT MAXEY

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Jermell Johnson , at 250 pounds and well over 6 feet tall, was considered a boy inside a man's body.

He was constantly teased about his size and childlike ways by other youths at Green Oak Center, a maximum-security unit at W.J. Maxey Boys Training School that has been **Johnson** 's home since 1990.

Johnson , 19, was not a discipline problem and was "just starting to work on his own victimization by his mother" years ago, a youth specialist at the Maxey school near Whitmore Lake said Tuesday.

He recently had been assigned to sweeping floors as part of a work detail where he earned 50 cents an hour, said the specialist, who has worked at Maxey for 14 years and spoke only on the condition that he not be identified.

On Sunday, **Johnson** was sent back to his first-floor room after finishing his job, but he found a way back to the second floor, where he had been working.

Investigators believe **Johnson** persuaded Barbara Synnestvedt, 46, a social worker at the center since September, to unlock the door of a staff lounge. Once inside, he beat and strangled her, investigators believe.

She was found dead Sunday night.

"From the physical evidence, it looks like he intended to sexually assault her, and she fought back and he ended up killing her," the youth specialist said.

State Police Lt. William Pertner, commander of the Brighton post, said Synnestvedt's larynx was crushed and her throat was bruised. There were no visible signs of sexual assault, but investigators are awaiting test results before making a final determination.

"It was a violent struggle," Pertner said. "There was blood on her and blood on him and scratches on his forearms."

Police and school officials have declined to name the murder suspect because he has not been formally charged. But relatives and law enforcement sources have identified him as **Johnson** , an east side Detroit resident who was sent to Maxey in 1990 after pleading guilty to three counts of rape for attacking a neighbor in her car. He was to be held at Maxey until age 21.

Pertner said the suspect was fingerprinted Tuesday and investigators obtained a search warrant to get body fluids from him. Police will seek a murder warrant later this week.

Meanwhile at Maxey, top officials from the state Department of Social Services huddled Tuesday to discuss security procedures.

A lockdown of more than 200 students was lifted Tuesday afternoon at Maxey, said Otis Davis, director of the state Department of Social Services office of delinquency services. A decision on whether to lift a lockdown at Green Oak Center, which houses about 100 violent juvenile offenders, will be made today, he said.

Davis said DSS officials are considering using more lighting, video cameras and personal tracking devices, which would notify guards when a staff member has fallen or is in danger.

The youth specialist said more mental health programs also are needed at Maxey. Attacks against staff members, especially women staffers, have increased recently, he said.

And although **Johnson** was not considered a discipline problem, the specialist said other youths at Green Oak Center have become "more dangerous, more violent and more psychotic."

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