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Police hunting predator; Same man believed involved in murder case

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A police task force has been formed to hunt down the man responsible for a series of vicious attacks on area women in the past two years. Investigators believe the same man may be involved in the murder of prostitute Kimlyn Judy Tolgyes and the disappearance of two other women.

An 18-year-old woman severely beaten and left for dead on Hess Street North near Barton Street Sept. 4 was probably the victim of the same person, police say.

The five-member task force, dubbed **Project Advocate**, will co-ordinate the investigation and look at similar cases in other jurisdictions to generate leads. Hamilton police Chief Ken Robertson hopes the public will support the task force by providing information about the incidents and suspect.

The team is headed by Staff Sergeant Steve Hrab of the major crimes unit. It is also investigating the apparent disappearance of Susan Gourley, 39, of Hamilton, last seen in November 2001, and Felicia Floriani, a 15-year-old Hamilton girl last seen in June.

Hrab said yesterday police have great concern for the two women because they have not been seen in their usual haunts for a long time.

John Floriani, Felicia's father, said his daughter hadn't been living at home for over a year, and he only found out she'd been missing a few months ago when he saw it on the news. Felicia had been involved in drugs, he said, and had run away in the past, intending to go to B.C. The girl's mother died three years ago.

"She's just a very headstrong little girl," he said. "It just frightens you when she's like this."

He said he hopes she's just decided to hide out until her birthday next February, when she turns 16.

Her grandmother, Giulia Floriani, said she hasn't seen her granddaughter in two years.

"For all we know, she could be alive, she could be dead."

It wasn't like Gourley to disappear for any stretch of time, said friend Deborah Lussier Nanson. She said Gourley always kept regular contact with her family.

"She was a beautiful girl. She had a big heart," she said. "A very good person, very loving."

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Police are warning sex trade workers and female street youths to watch out for a white male in his early 20s who has a slim build, light-coloured hair, blue eyes and acne.

Investigators believe the predator operates along Barton Street between Wellington Street North and Gage Avenue North, as well as King Street East from Wellington to Sherman Avenue.

Hrab said women are being told through the Sexual Assault Centre and the needle exchange program to take extra precautions like watching over one another and jotting down licence numbers.

Krista Warnke, of the Sexual Assault Centre, said police told her they'd give the centre flyers to distribute to women on the street. She said although she's heard women talk of violent incidents on the street, many of them aren't reported to police.

"There's no question that many sex trade workers distrust police and are very reluctant to approach police or give any information," she said.

Staff at the Van Needle Exchange Program, run by the city's social and public health services department, will also hand out copies of the police notice. "They continually reinforce and talk with people about safety when they're out on the van," said manager Valine Vaillancourt. "It's dangerous on the street all of the time."

This is the second time police have issued a warning about this particular man. In October last year, they released a composite sketch and warned of his escalating level of violence after three attacks on prostitutes in downtown alleys between January and October last year. Two women were choked -- one of them left unconscious -- and one was robbed with a gun.

Hrab said that sketch "bears a striking resemblance" to the attacker in the cases the task force is working on.

Hrab, who is the Hamilton police liaison with Halton homicide detectives working on Tolgyes' death, said police can't say for sure she was slain by the predator, but she is included in the investigation because she was a prostitute who worked in the area where other attacks occurred and investigators have found other similarities they are not ready to disclose.

Tolgyes' body was dumped in rustic Kerncliffe Park off Kerns Road in Burlington. Halton police do not believe she was killed in the park. She was last seen getting out of a red pickup truck on Grant Avenue in Hamilton around 9 p.m. Aug. 23 or 24.

A Sept. 4 attack on an 18-year-old woman known to police as a street person not involved in the sex trade was included in the list of attacks because of the level of violence involved and similarities in how the unconscious woman was left under bushes near an abandoned factory.

Hrab also said police believe there may have been another man involved in at least one of the assaults.

If the attacks were just about sexual assault or robbery, police would not be seeing "certain things" happening in the cases, which Hrab declined to explain for fear of jeopardizing the investigation. "He or they are engaged in violence above the norm. He is hurting them a lot."

The first attack occurred in January last year when a woman who went with a man into an alley at the rear of King Street East and Victoria Avenue was robbed with a gun.

Three months later, on March 19, a 17-year-old prostitute was approached by a man at King Street East and Tisdale Street North and was later choked in an alley until she blacked out. When she awoke, she was bleeding from her mouth and face and her pants had been pulled down.

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On Sept. 25 last year, a woman in her 20s was taken to hospital for neck injuries after a man tried to strangle her with some kind of rope in an alley in the area of King Street East and Proctor Boulevard just after 5 a.m. The rope broke and she fled.

A month later, police issued a warning about the suspect and a sketch and there were no more incidents until perhaps November when Susan Gourley was first reported missing. Then in June this year, Felicia Floriani disappeared.

On Aug. 2 this year, a woman was attacked in the same general area in Hamilton but police are withholding the details.

On Aug. 29, Tolgyes' body was found in Burlington.

On Sept. 4, someone beat an 18-year-old woman and left her on Hess Street North unconscious and barely breathing serious facial injuries.

Anyone with information is asked to call Crimestoppers or the task force hot line at 905-546-2100.

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GRAPHIC: Photo: A police task force will investigate the disappearance of two Hamilton women, Susan Gourley, 39, above, last seen in November 2001 and Felicia Floriani, 15, missing since June. Police believe the same man may be involved in a series of vicious assaults and a murder.; Photo: Felicia Floriani; Photo: A composite sketch of suspect wanted for a series of assaults.

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