

Judge: Investigation not reason enough to free drug dealers

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One by one, the convicted drug dealers appeared yesterday before a Philadelphia judge on a TV screen from prisons across the state, hoping they'd be freed.

TAINTED JUSTICE

The inmates landed in jail after narcotics Officer Jeffrey Cujdik arrested them with help from his longtime confidential informant, Ventura Martinez.

Their public defenders argued that they should be released on

bail, pending the outcome of an FBI and police investigation into allegations that Cujdik sometimes lied on search-warrant applications to gain access to suspected drug homes. Those allegations were first reported in the Feb. 9 *Daily News*.

But Common Pleas Judge Sheila Woods-Skipper said there wasn't enough evidence to convince her to let these drug dealers — some with lengthy rap sheets — back on the street.

“While the court is very troubled by the nature and serious-

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ness of the allegations and the articles that appeared as a result ... the only evidence we know is there is an investigation ongoing," Woods-Skipper said.

"Should the allegations prove to be true, that would be a compelling reason to provide bail," she said.

Assistant Public Defender Bradley S. Bridge is seeking to reopen the cases of 52 convicted drug defendants arrested by Cujdik, 10 of whom are in prison.

Yesterday, Woods-Skipper heard arguments on whether to grant bail to six of the 10 jailed defendants. The hearings were held through video conferencing, allowing relatives to see their loved ones on a screen. The wife of one defendant put her head in her hands and rocked back and forth when she learned her husband

was not coming home. The mother of another wept openly when Woods-Skipper denied bail for her 31-year-old son.

After the hearings, Bridge said he was disappointed and disagreed with Woods-Skipper's opinion that there wasn't enough evidence to at least temporarily free the inmates.

Assistant District Attorney Robin B. Godfrey said the judge "did the absolute right thing."

During yesterday's proceeding, Godfrey argued that convicted drug dealers — especially ones who had pleaded guilty — shouldn't be freed based on "unsubstantiated allegations" in newspaper articles.

Bridge still hopes that Woods-Skipper will grant new trials or overturn convictions of the 52 defendants. Woods-Skipper set a Sept. 25 date for a status hearing, with hopes that the investigation will be further along. ★

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