

Couple accused of abusing teen

Prosecutors say the Buckner residents kept the disabled girl captive in their basement.

By JAMES HART
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Prosecutors on Tuesday accused a Buckner couple of keeping a disabled teenager, their second cousin, captive in their basement.

Thomas E. Silkwood and Elizabeth G. Silkwood, both 43, face one count each of felonious restraint and third-degree elder abuse in Jackson County Circuit Court. Thomas Silkwood also faces a charge of second-degree domestic assault for allegedly choking and hitting the 19-year-old.

According to court records, the young woman said that the Silkwoods — whom she called aunt and uncle — kept her in the basement of their home for more than a year.

The woman said she often was forced to use a bucket or a bleach bottle when she had to go to the bathroom. Instead of a bed, she slept on two couch cushions and a pillowcase stuffed with shirts.

"Sometimes she would go weeks at a time without being able to bathe," Jackson County Prosecutor Mike Sanders said. "She was given just one meal a day. This isn't an isolated incident; this occurred over a long period of time."

The couple's attorney, John A. Picerno, acknowledged that his clients locked the young woman in their basement when they were away, but he disputed the length of time and other allegations. He said the Silkwoods never forced the 19-year-old to use a bucket or bottle as a bathroom.

Picerno said that the Silkwoods were the only relatives willing to care for the teenager, who otherwise would have been placed in state care. He characterized the case as one of neglect, not abuse.

Authorities in May were called to the 200 block of Manor Lane in Buckner after a neighbor, Dayna Birk, found the young woman with one of

her garbage bags. The woman told Birk that she went through neighbors' trash to find food, Birk told a reporter in May.

In May, Birk and other neighbors said they were struck by how much weight the 19-year-old had lost over the winter. They estimated that the teenager had gone from 140 pounds to 80 or 90 pounds.

The Jackson County prosecutor's office would not say where the 19-year-old is stay-

ing.

Picerno said the Silkwoods surrendered to authorities Tuesday afternoon and then bonded out. If found guilty, Thomas Silkwood faces a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison. Elizabeth Silkwood would face a maximum sentence of eight years. Neither had a criminal record, Sanders said.

The Star's Joe Lambe
contributed to this report.