

The Sun

**Lawyers want man moved to hospital
Suspect accused of ordering hit is called mentally ill**

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Attorneys for Mark C. Cordero -- the Columbia man accused of trying to hire a hit man to kill his estranged wife -- told a Howard County judge yesterday that their client is mentally ill.

Cordero clutched tear-stained tissues and openly wept in court as his attorneys asked that he be transferred to a locked unit at a mental hospital in Towson so he can receive appropriate treatment for his psychiatric problems while awaiting trial.

"This gentleman is sick. He is mentally ill," Judith R. Catterton told Judge Diane O. Leasure yesterday.

The motion was opposed by prosecutors who said it would take Cordero out of jail and put him too close to his estranged wife, who still fears her husband.

In emotional testimony, Cordero's father blamed his son's behavior on his mental problems.

"If he hadn't been in a depressed mood, he never would have done it," Chuck Cordero, a retired Silver Spring engineer, testified. "Mark really likes people."

With his son sitting just inches from him, the elder Cordero said that his son "is very embarrassed by what he has done."

Asked about the statements, Catterton said that Chuck Cordero was surmising what he had read about in press accounts and had not talked about the details of the incident with his son. But in court she opened the door for an insanity defense.

Mark Cordero, 43, was arrested June 30 after police said he met twice with an undercover police detective posing as a potential hit man. According to the charges, Cordero was willing to pay \$10,000 for a slaying that was to be disguised as a carjacking while Cordero was away on a trip.

Dr. Neil Blumberg, the psychiatrist who evaluated Cordero, testified that he suffered from severe, recurrent depression. He said Cordero, a former IBM employee, is taking antidepressants and a drug he described as "antipsychotic."

Prosecutor Mary V. Murphy said she was "vehemently" opposed to transferring Cordero to Towson's Sheppard Pratt Hospital. The mental hospital is about three miles from where Regina Cordero -- the alleged murder target -- lives. Murphy said when she told the woman about the defense's request, Regina Cordero immediately went out and clocked the distance on her car.

"She is terrified of the defendant, quite frankly, with good cause," Murphy said.

Murphy argued that Cordero's family members -- several of whom came to court yesterday for the hearing -- could hire a private psychiatrist for any care he may require at the local jail.

Leasure said she would rule on the defense request by tomorrow.

The approach of Cordero's attorneys at yesterday's hearing appears to pave the way for Cordero to enter an insanity plea on charges of paying an undercover police officer thousands of dollars to murder his wife.

Catterton -- who is also representing Montgomery County politician Ruthann Aron in a similar case -- said she is considering entering a not criminally responsible plea, but has not made a final decision.

That plea would mean that Cordero would be evaluated by state and defense psychiatrists to see whether he understood his actions or knew right from wrong at the time of his alleged crime.

In yesterday's emotional hearing, Chuck Cordero testified that he was so worried about his son's mental condition that he called the Howard County Detention Center to place him on a suicide watch.

Through choking sobs, Cordero said that his son had volunteered to go to the Persian Gulf war and help with IBM communications systems used by the military. He addressed Murphy from the witness stand after he testified.

"Mark is a good guy," Cordero said. "If it was your son, Miss Murphy, what would you want done with him? You would want him helped."

Mark and Regina Cordero have been involved in divorce and custody battles -- including allegations of violence and adultery -- that left a two-year trail of documents in Howard County courts.

Throughout the couple's five-year marriage, Regina Cordero, who goes by Gina, contends that her husband has physically abused and harassed her. Complaints about Cordero's temper are contained in court records of their divorce proceeding.

In a filing in April, Regina Cordero said her husband -- who worked for IBM for 20 years -- had gone to counseling for temper problems before their marriage but that during the marriage his problems grew worse. He verbally and physically abused her and the children -- including a teen-age son and teen-age daughter from his previous marriage who lived with the couple in their single-family home in Columbia's Hickory Ridge village, the filing said.

Regina Cordero grew concerned about her safety and that of their son, Evan, then 3, and decided to leave her husband and move to Towson, according to the court records.

She obtained protective orders against her husband in 1995 and 1996 -- both of which he agreed to, the records show.

In one case, she alleged that he closed a car door on her leg when she was putting the boy in the car, cursed at her and threatened to spit on her, according to court records filed by the her.

In February 1995, Regina Cordero was awarded custody of their son, and Mark Cordero was ordered to pay \$350 a month for child support.

Helen L. Weiss, a social worker appointed by the court to investigate the custody situation, wrote to the court last December that Cordero has "difficulty appropriately controlling his emotions, specifically his anger and temper."

Weiss recommended that Cordero receive "individual therapy to help him deal with his emotions."

But yesterday, Chuck Cordero said he was not aware that his son suffered from emotional problems before this.

"He needs help," Cordero said. "If he wasn't a good guy I wouldn't be here today."