

Ex-officer on probation for drug thefts

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A former Metro police sergeant was placed on probation and ordered to complete a drug treatment program when he pleaded guilty yesterday to two drug-related burglary charges.

Former Sgt. Mark Steele, 40, resigned from the Police Department after he was arrested Dec. 7 on charges of stealing drugs from the pharmacy at Metro General Hospital last November and from a drug cabinet at Summit Surgery Center in April 2000.

Defense attorney David Raybin said yesterday that Steele "became addicted to prescription painkillers several years ago, due to migraine headaches." Raybin blamed the headaches partly on "the stress of his job."

Steele, who was a 16-year police veteran, said outside the courtroom that he wanted to "apologize to family, friends and co-workers in the Metro Police Department and especially to the citizens of Davidson County."

"This could happen to anybody," Steele said of his addiction. "I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy." He said he hopes to live the rest of his life "in a healthy and godly way."

Davidson County Criminal Court Judge J. Randall Wyatt approved a plea bargain in which Steele received a four-year suspended sentence and four years' probation and was ordered to remain in a drug treatment program as long as his probation officer thinks is necessary. He also was ordered to pay an undetermined amount to cover the cost of the drugs he admitted stealing.

Police said Steele became a suspect in the April 2000 theft at the Summit Surgery Center when someone reported seeing his pickup truck in the facility's parking lot. But investigators said they did not have enough evidence to proceed at that point.

Surveillance tapes showed that Steele was at General Hospital on the night of Nov. 21, when someone broke into the pharmacy and stole painkillers. Hospital security stepped up surveillance and found Steele in the area when the new security system indicated, nine days later, that someone was trying to get into the pharmacy.