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**Full Text** (476 words)

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Although a little too slowly for comfort, the justice system eventually worked in the case of Dale Morris Jr. After Morris spent more than four harrowing months in jail awaiting trial for the murder of his 9-year-old neighbor, Sharra Ferger, charges against him were dropped and he is back home with his family in the east Pasco community of Blanton.

For some time it has been looking as if State Attorney Bernie McCabe and Pasco County Sheriff Lee Cannon didn't have the evidence to hold Morris, but it was due to the relentless and thorough work of **Public Defender Bob Dillinger** and his staff that Morris was released. The case is an important reminder that not everyone accused is necessarily guilty and that a vigorous and well-resourced public defender's office is fundamental to ensuring justice.

The charges against Morris, a 45-year-old metal-cutter, appear to have been a rush to judgment. Sharra Ferger's sexual assault and stabbing death were deeply shocking and gruesome, and the community was in fear for its children and was demanding the perpetrator be found.

Four years earlier, 12-year-old Jennifer Odom, who lived just two miles from the Ferger home, had been similarly abducted and killed. No arrest has been made in that case. Sheriff Cannon was under terrific pressure to find the child molester-killer preying on the community. Morris, who had no prior violent criminal record, and whose wife swore he was with her the night of Sharra Ferger's slaying, was charged and jailed based on relatively flimsy evidence of a bite mark found on the girl's body. Two dentists hired by the state found that the bite mark, more likely than not, matched Morris' dentition.

Even after two nationally renowned forensic dentists hired by the defense disputed those findings, the state proceeded with Morris' prosecution. **Dillinger's office** responded with a tremendous amount of effort and resources. At one point, nearly every member of **Dillinger's Dade City office was working on the case, and Assistant Public Defender Tom Hanlon said the office** was prepared to spend as much as \$100,000 on expert witnesses alone.

Finally, after two crime labs determined that hair found on Sharra Ferger's body matched that of an unidentified male and not Morris, the prosecutors set him free. No DNA evidence pointed toward Morris; in fact, all of it pointed away from him.

**Dillinger's office** is to be commended for its extraordinary efforts. The case points up the need for a strong, well-financed public defender's office, one that can match prosecutors' access to expert witnesses and forensic scientists.

On very shaky grounds, authorities arrested and pursued a case against Morris and then wasted a great deal of time and energy trying to justify it. Now they can get down to the real business of looking for the man who left his DNA fingerprints at the scene of the crime.

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