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Man cleared for rape granted \$10 bond

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HOUSTON — A man who spent a dozen years in prison for a rape he didn't commit was freed Tuesday and headed straight for City Hall to discuss shortcomings in the criminal justice system with local officials.

Wearing dark clothes and carrying a red mesh gym bag and a paper sack containing his belongings, Ronald Taylor greeted his family with warm embraces outside the Harris County Jail.

"It hasn't really sunk in. I'm just glad to see my family," said Taylor, the third Texas prison inmate to be released because of problems with the Houston Police Department's crime lab.

Although his plans included eating shrimp, a delicacy he missed during the 12 years he spent in a state prison, and moving to Atlanta to marry Jeannette Brown, the fiancée who has waited for him since the mid-1990s, his first stop was City Hall.

After receiving a standing ovation from the audience, Taylor quietly urged City Council to prevent other innocent prisoners from rotting behind bars.

"They don't have the finances, they don't have nobody to help them," said Taylor, 47. "I think something needs to be done about that."

Taylor was convicted in 1995 of raping a woman two years earlier. He was sentenced to 60 years in prison.

The victim picked Taylor out of a lineup but acknowledged she only caught a glimpse of her attacker's face. During his trial, a crime lab analyst testified that no body fluids were present on the victim's bedsheet.

This summer, the Innocence Project paid to have a New Orleans lab retest the victim's bedsheet. Semen that lab found on the sheet matched the DNA of a man already in prison for failing to register as a sex offender.

Harris County District Attorney Chuck Rosenthal made a rare courtroom appearance on Tuesday to apologize to Taylor, and several council members echoed his regret.

State District Judge Denise Collins gave Taylor a \$10 bond. He then had to sift through paperwork at the Harris County Jail before he could be a free man.

"We've just been praying and I just had faith and I knew, I knew within my heart that one day he would get out," said his mother, Dorothy Henderson, a food-services supervisor at the Walker County Jail. "I didn't know how long, but I knew one day he would."

Taylor and Henderson said they didn't blame the criminal justice system for his imprisonment.

"I don't hold any grudges because I believe in God and I knew he would be free," Henderson said.

Roosevelt Carroll, the man whose DNA matched the evidence on the sheet, will not be prosecuted because the statute of limitations has expired. He also has been convicted of burglary with intent to commit sexual assault.

Taylor had a minor criminal record before he was accused of the rape, said Barry Scheck, the co-director of the Innocence Project. Taylor's initial efforts for post-conviction DNA testing were unsuccessful.

The rape conviction won't be cleared from Taylor's record unless the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals grants a writ of habeas corpus or Gov. Rick Perry pardons him. Scheck said he will seek a pardon as soon as possible.

Houston officials have been struggling to fix the troubled crime lab for years. An independent audit in 2002 raised concerns about DNA analysis procedures. In June, a former U.S. Justice Department inspector hired by the city cited hundreds of "serious and pervasive" flaws in forensic cases mishandled by the lab's DNA and serology sections. Taylor's case was not one of those identified in the audit.

Scheck said the lab's handling of Taylor's case was "as unacceptable as it gets." After spending the day meeting with prosecutors and city officials, however, he said he is hopeful that big changes will be made and the questionable cases will be reviewed.

"Everybody's got to pull together to rectify a legacy of injustice and to make sure that the innocent are exonerated and the people who really committed the crimes are identified," he said.

Associated Press Writer Juan A. Lozano contributed to this report.