

# **\* NEWS RELEASE \***

## **SERIAL CHILD MOLESTER SENTENCED TO 81 YEARS-TO-LIFE IN PRISON FOR ASSAULTING NEIGHBORHOOD GIRLS**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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Monterey County District Attorney Dean D. Flippo announced today that Salinas resident Ernest Vega Morales, age 47, has been sentenced to 75 years-to-life in prison plus an additional six years for molesting three girls. Morales was convicted of child molestation on March 3, 2016 following a jury trial. He was sentenced by Judge Julie R. Culver, who imposed consecutive sentences for the convictions. She noted Morales' crimes involved great violence, great bodily harm and the threat of great bodily harm. She further noted the victims, who when molested ranged from 7 to 8 years old, were particularly vulnerable; that Morales displayed planning in targeting and isolating his victims after gaining their trust; and his conduct towards his victims was increasingly violent.

The jury found Morales guilty of all charges, including sexual penetration of a child 10 or under, forcible lewd acts on a child, four counts of lewd acts on a child, two counts of criminal threats, two counts of dissuading a witness by force or fear, and a special allegation that Morales committed sex offenses against multiple child victims. Under California's Three Strikes Law, Morales' convictions will constitute 10 "strikes." He will also have to register as sex offender for life.

The oldest victim, now an adult, testified that Morales molested her in his trailer when she was 7 years old in July 2004. He was the neighbor of her relative. The second victim, now 11, testified that between 2012 and 2013 Morales, her neighbor, molested her on two occasions when she was 8 and threatened that if she disclosed what he was doing he would kill her family. The youngest victim, now 10, testified that when she was 8 years old in 2013 her neighbor, Morales, picked her up from the yard where she played with a friend, took her to a more secluded location, and forcibly molested her. When she told him that she would tell her mom what he was doing, he told her that if she told anyone he would kill her family. The girl did not disclose the molest to her mother until March 2015, after Morales had moved away.

Both minor victims were assisted by the District Attorney's service dog Odie when they testified.

The case was investigated by Salinas Police Department Officers Anthony Garcia and District Attorney Investigators Jorge Ramirez and Jackie Meroney.