

A prisoner working at Riddle Development Center in Morganton is believed to have escaped this morning just before noon-

and deputies all over western North Carolina are on alert.

After unsuccessfully looking for an inmate, a housekeeper at the Center noticed her vehicle was missing. The alleged theft prompted a head count, which alerted authorities to the absence of 18-year-old inmate William Hicks.

The vehicle he is believed to be driving, allegedly stolen from the housekeeper, is a burgundy 1999 Ford Contour with tag numbers WRS 1725. Hicks is described as a white male, approximately 5'7", 118 lbs, with brown hair and hazel eyes. Hicks was serving 10 months for possession of stolen goods. While his last known address was in Canton, he does have a history in Winston Salem, causing authorities in surrounding areas like Wilkes County to be on extra alert today. Authorities say Hicks could be anywhere, however, and are asking drivers statewide to be vigilant on the roads today.

Riddle Development Center is engaged in a cooperative program with Western Youth Institute. As many as 20 minimum security inmates from the Institute work at the center, mostly in a housekeeping capacity. Inmates do not interact with the Center's patients, officials say. Currently, the center is reviewing its security procedures.