



PORT TOWNSEND & JEFFERSON COUNTY
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County pays \$1.6 million to avoid trial in case of man who died at jail

Jefferson County has paid \$1.6 million to settle a federal civil rights lawsuit involving the March 2001 death of a 23-year old man while in custody at the jail.

The lawsuit alleged excessive force and failure to secure medical care for 23-year-old Kevin W. Bledsoe, who died after being taken to the jail for causing a disturbance in Port Hadlock.

The civil trial was slated to begin Oct. 25. Although the county's agreement to settle out of court does not constitute any admission of guilt, it is the most Jefferson County has ever paid in such a case and is believed to be one of the largest excessive force settlements by a county government in the Pacific Northwest.

The money was deposited Oct. 14 in the account of Bledsoe's parents, who live in Texas, according to attorney Erik Heipt, one of the Seattle attorneys who worked on the case for about 18 months.

Heipt said the five Sheriff's Office personnel involved with the case, all of them still working here, did not intend to cause Bledsoe's death. Pete Piccini was sheriff at the time.

"These guys screwed up. There's no doubt about it," Heipt told The Leader. "But had they been trained properly, I don't think this would have happened. The biggest factor here is a complete lack of training. Worst of all, it was training that was available for free."

After Bledsoe's death on March 24, 2001, an independent investigation was performed by the Clallam County Sheriff's Office. That led to an official cause of death as being listed as a methamphetamine overdose coupled with a serious pre-existing heart condition and stressful restraint by sheriff's deputies.

Heipt and law partner Edwin Budge were prepared to prove in court that Bledsoe died from asphyxiation caused by the combination of being pepper-sprayed (which restricts breathing), then being covered with a face hood while bleeding from the nose and mouth, being hog-tied and left on his stomach in a patrol car, and again being hog-tied and placed on his stomach in a crisis cell with pressure applied to his back.

"The cause of death was asphyxiation," Heipt said, which they felt they would prove with the help of the doctor who worked on the John F. Kenney and Martin Luther King Jr. slayings from the 1960s, and the Nicole Brown Simpson family's civil case against O.J. Simpson. Heipt said the amount of meth in Bledsoe's system was small, and he had no heart condition.

"Kevin Bledsoe was one relatively small, unarmed person who had not committed a crime other than to create a disturbance," Heipt said. "He had not hurt anyone. He had not robbed anyone. He was a 23-year old kid on drugs who didn't know up from down. There were five officers there. Within two minutes of their arrival, [Bledsoe] was on his stomach, handcuffed and within four minutes, fully hog-tied. It wasn't the situation where they couldn't have handled it if [the officers] had used the most important weapon at their disposal, their brain."

Heipt encouraged Sheriff Mike Brasfield to examine the sworn depositions used in the Bledsoe case, and to examine how inmates are currently being treated.

"We talked to numerous former and current inmates and we are very, very concerned with the abuses that are going on in the jail," Heipt said.

"There are some very competent correction officers at the jail," Heipt said. "It's always easy for the people at the top to blame the foot soldiers for things that go wrong."