



Jefferson County jail death lawsuit settled

By Julie McCormick, Sun Staff
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Jefferson County has agreed to pay a record \$1.6 million to the parents of a young Texas man who died in 2001 while in restraints at the county jail, attorneys for the parents announced Thursday.

It's the largest such award for Jefferson County and one of the largest ever for an excessive force case in the Pacific Northwest, according to Seattle attorneys Edwin Budge and Erik Heipt.

Kevin Wayne Bledsoe, 23, was the victim of gross mishandling by officers, a federal lawsuit against the county alleged, charges reiterated in the settlement announcement.

"Kevin Bledsoe lost his life after members of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office sprayed him in the face with pepper spray, tied him up in a controversial 'hog-tie' position using a homemade rope, put a hood over his injured and bleeding head, brought him to the Jefferson County jail rather than to a hospital, and held him face down on the floor of an isolation cell until he suddenly went limp and lost consciousness," the attorneys contended in the lawsuit.

"Instead of immediately securing emergency medical care for the young man, the officers then inexplicably removed all of his clothing, left the cell, and closed the door behind them — leaving him alone, face down, motionless, stark naked, with a pool of blood around his head. They did not return until it was too late."

Former Jefferson County Administrator David Goldsmith, who continued to handle the case for the county after his retirement, said he was reluctant to comment because there was a confidentiality agreement included in the settlement that forbids either party to discuss it publicly. He would not confirm the settlement amount.

Bledsoe's parents' attorney Erik Heipt said there was no confidentiality agreement.

Both sides did say, however, that the exact facts of the case as presented by the parents' attorneys were not agreed to in the settlement.

Goldsmith said the county did not regard it as an excessive force case.

An internal investigation was done after Bledsoe's death by the Clallam County Sheriff's Office. Goldsmith said none of the officers involved was disciplined for their actions. "The officers acted pretty much according to the rules," he said, except for the question of whether Bledsoe should have been taken to a hospital.

Heipt said the hog-tie method of restraining combative suspects is rarely part of police procedures anymore because of the high risk of injury or death, especially for those who are mentally ill or under the influence of drugs.

Methamphetamine was found in Bledsoe's system, and at the time of his death an independent pathologist determined the death accidental, brought on by the drug and an existing heart condition.

"It's certainly a shame the individual died but in all likelihood he would have anyway," Goldsmith said.

Heipt said further investigation by other independent investigators for the parents determined that Bledsoe's system contained relatively low levels of meth and, while he had an enlarged heart, it was not beyond the normal range.

Bledsoe, who had recently moved to Port Hadlock from Texas, had been arrested following a fight in a supermarket parking lot.

The county will only pay \$10,000 out of pocket toward the settlement, Goldsmith said. The remainder is covered by the county's risk insurance pool.

The case comes on the heels of a settlement earlier this year of a class action lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union over inadequate medical care in the jail.