



State settles lawsuit over Ketchikan inmate's death

The state of Alaska has paid \$573,000 to settle a lawsuit over the death of an inmate at the Ketchikan Correctional Center, according to attorneys representing the inmate's mother.

The wrongful death claim involves 31-year-old Troy Wallace, who died in his jail cell almost two years ago from severe complications due to alcohol withdrawal.

State officials declined Thursday to comment on the case, citing litigation. The plaintiff has brought a separate lawsuit against Ketchikan emergency physician Ernest Meloche, a contract-medical provider for the jail who advised correctional officers on Wallace's treatment, according to the plaintiff's attorneys.

The lawsuit against the state was brought on behalf of Wallace's mother, Julia Walker, of Mount Vernon, Wash., by Seattle civil rights attorneys Edwin Budge and Erik Heipt.

Heipt said jail employees failed to respond adequately to Wallace's condition.

Wallace was already showing symptoms of alcohol withdrawal, Heipt said, when he voluntarily presented himself and was admitted to the jail on July 20, 2004, to serve a 10-day sentence for disorderly conduct.

Heipt said Wallace was not treated for 48 hours while his symptoms worsened into a medical condition known as delirium tremens - a serious medical emergency that requires hospitalization.

By that time, Wallace was hallucinating, scratching at the walls and frothing at the mouth and, Heipt said, jail employees, including a nurse, treated him with a preventative medication that came too late.

Heipt said Wallace's condition continued to deteriorate rapidly. A videotape of his last two hours shows him repeatedly trying to stand and collapsing in his cell until he finally appears to go into a seizure.

"And he lies on the ground in a contorted position with no clothes except his underwear and no one checks on him for two hours. By the time they did, he was long since dead," Heipt said.

Wallace died in his cell during the early-morning hours of July 24. Heipt said correctional officers could have responded to the scene, which was playing out on the monitors in their control room nearby.

"It's just something that never should have happened," he said.

Heipt said Walker's main goal in bringing the lawsuit was to prevent another such death.

"She is hopeful after the settlement that the state will look very carefully at its policies and revise them accordingly," he said.

Citing the continuing litigation in the case, state Commissioner of Corrections Marc Antrim declined to comment on the department's policies and procedures regarding inmates with alcohol withdrawal symptoms.

Heipt said death from alcohol withdrawal is a recurring problem in jails nationwide.