

NEWS

Family says Calumet County Jail staff, medical staff ignored teen's promise of suicide



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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Published 12:37 p.m. CT Aug. 22, 2022 | Updated 5:35 p.m. CT Aug. 22, 2022

For nearly four months in the summer of 2019, Demetrius LaShaun Stephenson told other inmates, guards and medical staff at the Calumet County Jail he was hearing voices that said he should kill himself.

No one referred him for medical or psychiatric treatment, according to a lawsuit, and he finally hanged himself in his cell. He had turned 18 the month before.

Now his estate has sued the county and more than two dozen people, from guards to county health department workers and members of Advanced Correctional Healthcare, or ACH.

The complaint accuses the defendants of malicious, wanton and deliberate indifference to Stephenson's conditions and history. It includes claims against the county under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act.

"Demetrius is one of the many victims of low-cost fixed-price contract jail healthcare," said John Bradley, the family's attorney. "This private for-profit healthcare contractor is financially motivated to provide substandard care, to deny expensive prescription medication, to restrict access to outside health providers, to understaff nurses at the jail."

"The cost here was the completely avoidable loss of Demetrius's life," Bradley said.

ACH, the company Calumet County contracted with to provide medical care at the jail, is also named as a defendant.

It seeks unspecified compensatory and punitive damages. Messages seeking response from both Calumet County and Tennessee-based ACH were not immediately returned Monday.

According to the suit:

Stephenson was booked into the jail May 3. He was removed from suicide watch within days. Over the next weeks, he repeatedly talked with health care workers and described his many

hallucinations, anxiety and depression, and repeatedly talked about suicide.

He had a history of hospitalization for mental conditions, and had attempted suicide in the past and in June during his stay in the jail. The lawsuit says Stephenson was being held pre-trial, but does not explain the circumstances of his arrest.

Bradley, of Strang Bradley in Madison, provided a booking report that shows Stephenson was arrested on a warrant for failing to appear for hearings in two prior theft cases, and could not post the \$1,000 bail. The cases were later taken from the online records after Stephenson's death.

"Other inmates in the jail could tell that Demetrius was suicidal and repeatedly contacted Calumet County Jail correctional officers asking for help," the lawsuit states.

"During May through August 2019, because there were so few inmates and medical staff at the Calumet County Jail, every above named Calumet County Jail medical staff member was aware that Demetrius was suicidal."

The lawsuit claims Stephenson's medical needs were ignored per policies adopted by ACH and the county meant to save money.

"Mistraining its employees, pressuring them not to provide medical care they believe is clinically necessary, and delaying the provision of care and medication in hopes a detainee is transferred out are all tactics that ACH uses to control its clients' costs and increase its own profits," the lawsuit states.

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