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Trenton pays \$350K settlement for woman's death in police lockup

By David Foster, The Trentonian

TRENTON >> Temporarily locking up people at the Trenton Police Department is continuing to become a costly endeavor for the city.

For the second time in seven months, the city agreed to settle a lawsuit regarding an inmate's death at the Trenton Police Department's lockup facility for six figures, bringing the total damages to over \$1 million.

Trenton council approved Thursday to award the family of Loretta Klank \$350,000 stemming from her death in March 2008.

Klank hung herself from the bars of a cell at the city police department's North Clinton Avenue headquarters.

The lawsuit — filed in 2013 — alleged police department personnel failed to “adequately search and remove” a piece of clothing — a sweatshirt or sweater — from Klank, which she used to hang herself, and did not supervise her as required.

“My client's family wanted to resolve this matter as opposed to going to trial because they wanted to put this behind them,” attorney Robin Lord, who is representing Klank's sister, said Thursday after the settlement was approved. “I, on the other hand, wanted to take it to trial.”

In addition to the allegations of negligence in Klank's death, the lawsuit states the defendants violated her constitutional rights, lacked concern for her "obvious and serious medical needs," failed to render aid and falsely arrested her.

"The lack of respect that Trenton police have for its citizens once again is demonstrated in the tragic end of the life of Ms. Klank," Lord previously said.

Approximately three years after Klank's death, a man in Trenton police lockup suffered a similar fate, a case Lord was also involved with.

In January 2011, Kenneth Howard, 55, was found dead in his cell at the city police department's lockup facility. The medical examiner's office determined the Vietnam vet died from chronic liver failure due to cirrhosis of the liver.

Lord previously told The Trentonian police personnel did not monitor the cell for more than seven hours.

Policy dictates that police or aides have to check on inmates in lockup every 30 minutes.

A city police officer and two police aides faced charges in connection with the death for tampering with public records, but the charges were later dropped.

"They fabricated the logs because they were too lazy to get off their behinds and do their job," Lord previously said, noting the employees instead opted to watch a playoff sports game on TV.

Lord, who is constantly filing lawsuits against the city for police abuse, scored another major win in August, when Trenton decided to settle the Howard suit for \$690,000.

The city admitted no wrongdoing in either of the six-figure settlements.

“What happened to Mr. Howard was a disgrace,” Lord said in August. “I don’t know how any of the officers can live with themselves, and I don’t know how they’re still employees. I just don’t know how the city of Trenton turned a blind eye to what happened to Mr. Howard. If Mr. Howard was a white surgeon who got picked up for parking tickets, I wonder if the result would have been the same.”

The bleeding did not stop for the city with these two lawsuits in regards to the city’s troubled lockup facility.

In November 2014, the city settled a lawsuit with resident Abdullah Rasheed for \$40,000. Rasheed suffered a heart attack after repeated requests for his medication at the North Clinton Avenue facility.

Rasheed was taken into custody by Trenton police on April 21, 2011, a month after he underwent open-heart surgery, the lawsuit states.

His wife allegedly dropped off his prescribed Nitroglycerin pills, which are designed to prevent the reoccurrence of heart attacks, the day he was arrested.

Rasheed requested on a number of occasions to be administered his heart medication, but for four straight days he was denied by the officers, court records indicate.

The result — on April 25, 2011 Rasheed suffered another heart attack along with other injuries, leading to permanent damages, according to the civil complaint.

Like the other settlements, Trenton admitted no wrongdoing.

There is also another unresolved lawsuit involving a man who was not given his medication in lockup.

Donyell Knight suffered multiple seizures and a massive stroke and nearly died in police lockup in 2014, according to a federal lawsuit filed in August.

Knight was not treated for two days, leading to partial blindness caused by a blocked carotid artery that cut off blood flow from his heart to the brain, the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit paints a disturbing picture of a police department that allegedly did not learn any lessons or take steps to address failed policies and practices that resulted in Howard's death three years earlier.

"I can't account for the lack of empathy and positive conscious policing that occurs in these moments," Knight's attorney Beth Baldinger previously told The Trentonian. "I don't know what goes on in minds of officers who abuse their power."

With the Klank, Howard, and Rasheed settlements, the city has paid nearly \$1.1 million in lawsuits regarding the city's lockup in the past couple years, and that's not including Trenton's legal fees.