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## **Mentally ill inmate dies at half his body weight in Broward jail; lawsuit alleges neglect**

July 13, 2014|By Tonya Alanez, Sun Sentinel

During his 155 days in jail, Raleigh Priester withered to half his body weight.

When the 6-foot-2-inch father of two was found dead on his jail cell floor, he weighed 120 pounds.

On the day of his arrest five months earlier, he had weighed in at 240 pounds, records show.

Priester, 52, spent the final months of his troubled life in solitary confinement at a Broward sheriff's jail, naked, mumbling to himself and playing an imaginary flute.

The mentally ill man frequently refused to eat or take medications, and alternated between banging his head on the floor and laying in a fetal position on his bunk, jail medical records show.

Now, Priester's family is suing the Sheriff's Office, its inmate health-care provider and others, saying they ignored Priester's glaringly obvious mental health and physical ailments and failed to provide him with medication, treatment or adequate nutrition.

"He died a slow and horrible death," said attorney Greg Lauer, who filed the federal lawsuit Wednesday.

The Sheriff's Office said it hadn't yet received the complaint, but would review it and respond in court. The inmate health-care provider declined to comment about the case, citing federal medical privacy laws.

The U.S. Army veteran with a two-decade history of schizophrenia died July 10, 2012, at a jail in Pompano Beach.

It was a seemingly immature act that landed Priester behind bars.

He was jailed on the morning of Feb. 6, 2012, accused of hurling a rock at a Fort Lauderdale parking-garage attendant and hitting him in the upper back after Priester was told he was trespassing.

When the arresting officer arrived on scene, Priester was clutching three softball-sized rocks and was chasing two attendants, a police report said.

Priester had collided with the law before. And his mental health had factored into the outcome.

He spent 11 years in a state mental hospital after a Broward jury in 1992 found him not guilty by reason of insanity of felony burglary and robbery charges. It was a rare verdict for an acquittal that's often argued for, but rarely with success.

Priester remained under supervision of the [Broward County](#) mental health court until 2010, records show.

While jailed from February to July 2012, Priester deteriorated before everyone's eyes with no intervention, the lawsuit alleges.

A jail employee tried to hydrate Priester by squirting water into his mouth with a syringe. He became so weak he could not sit up or put on his own pants without help, the lawsuit says.

Priester's five months behind bars was interrupted by a weeklong hospital stay after he was found unresponsive on his cell floor on May 22, 2012.

He was taken to the intensive-care unit at Broward Health North.

He had pneumonia, hypothermia, anemia, a blood infection and was suffering from malnourishment and dehydration. His feet were covered in festering open sores and he weighed 139 pounds, records show.

Priester's treating doctor noted in a consultation report that "the patient is critically ill" and "medically he is very fragile."

Priester was put on a high-calorie diet and in a week gained 11.6 pounds. When he was discharged May 29, 2012, he was up to nearly 151 pounds, records show.

Priester was sent back to the jail with "specific instructions" for his continued care, the lawsuit says.

Within six weeks, Priester was dead and down to 120 pounds. He was found in a pool of vomit on his jail cell floor.

The Broward medical examiner ruled that Priester's manner of death was natural, caused by a heart condition. The autopsy report noted that Priester was "thin" and "was known to often refuse to eat or drink" but made no other mention of malnourishment or apparent weight loss.

The lawsuit was filed in federal court in Fort Lauderdale on behalf of Priester's estate, sister, daughter, son and brother.

Named along with the Sheriff's Office in the suit is [Broward County](#), Armor Correctional Health Services, which provides health care to the county's jail inmates, and two of its doctors, John Martin and Stanley Frankowitz.

Despite voice mail messages and emails, neither Martin nor Frankowitz could be reached for comment.

Armor spokeswoman Yeleny Suarez declined to comment on Priester's case but emphasized that "Armor supports its dedicated employees."

Armor, which has overseen health care for Broward inmates since 2004, provides care for jail and prison inmates in 16 other Florida counties, as well as seven other states.

On Feb. 1, Armor's \$25 million annual contract with the Sheriff's Office was renewed for five years.

"The Sheriff's Office has yet to be served with the lawsuit on these allegations, which apparently arose under former Sheriff [Al] Lamberti's tenure," Ron Gunzburger, general counsel for the agency, said in an email. "Of course, as is our duty, we will review the complaint and respond appropriately in court."

The lawsuit seeks an award of damages for mental and emotional injuries, funeral expenses, punitive damages, court costs and attorney fees.

"They neglected him to death," Lauer said. "They should have treated him like a human being, fed him, brought him to the hospital, treated the multiple infections he had. It's indefensible."

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