

Aria: We didn't follow procedures

By CATHERINE LUCEY
Philadelphia Daily News
02/02/10



Staff at Aria Health's Frankford campus violated hospital policy by not checking on Joaquin Rivera before he died in the emergency room in November, a top hospital official said yesterday at a City Council hearing held to probe the school guidance counselor's death.

"The policy was in place but not adhered to," Linde Finsrud Wilson, chief operating officer of Aria Health, said during the three-hour session.

Attorney Thomas Kline, who has been retained by Rivera's family to file a civil lawsuit against Aria Health System, said that Rivera, 63, was a victim of medical negligence.

"There were blatant and flagrant violations of policies and procedures," Kline said after his testimony. "We need to judge Aria on its deeds to date, not its words."

According to a report released last month by the state Department of Health, Rivera, a musician and Olney High School counselor, died of a heart attack and was unattended for more than 40 minutes. The state report said hospital staff made extensive errors before, during and after Rivera's death.

While Rivera sat dead in the waiting room, three vagrants stole his wristwatch.

Wilson said the hospital has also conducted a full review and made key changes to emergency-room procedures since Rivera's death, including adding security and requiring that the triage nurse go into the emergency room to look for patients.

She also said that the hospital provides much-needed services to the Frankford community, while under financial stress.

"While Mr. Rivera's death was a tragic occurrence that Aria has addressed with swift action, I stand before you today to respectfully ask that the Frankford campus, the lone provider of emergency care for a service area with a total population of 425,000, as well as its dedicated and caring staff, not be judged by this one incident," Wilson said.

Councilwoman Maria Quinones-Sanchez said the hearing should be considered a "teaching moment" on what residents should expect out of emergency-room care. She described Rivera as a personal friend.

"Joaquin Rivera was an incredible human being. He would give you the shirt off his back," Quinones-Sanchez said.