

Slaying in jail will cost Camden County

A 65-year-old Cherry Hill man's family settled a suit for \$4 million. His cell mate, deranged, beat him.

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Joel Seidel, who was mentally ill, was awaiting a hospital transfer.

The horrific beating death of Joel Seidel by his criminally insane cell mate forced the Camden County jail to institute a raft of changes, and prodded police departments to rethink how they handle the mentally ill.

Now the county will pay nearly \$4 million to settle a federal lawsuit filed by Seidel's two grown daughters - an amount their lawyers called one of the largest ever in a case of its kind.

"The Seidel family hopes that this settlement resonates . . . so that vulnerable inmates like Joel Seidel can be protected from senseless injuries and death," their attorney Tom Kline said.

The agreement was finalized yesterday. The daughters, Devra Seidel and Sharon Clark, live outside the area and were not available for comment.

Seidel, 65 and a longtime Cherry Hill resident, was jailed in December 2003 for violating an order barring contact with his former wife and one of his daughters.

He could have been bailed out for \$150, but the family wanted the court to commit Seidel, who suffered from schizophrenia, to a hospital for treatment - a process that was under way when inmate Marvin Lister killed him.

Lister, then 35, was a violent paranoid schizophrenic who had been committed to institutions since 1995. He was transferred to the jail from the Ancora Psychiatric Hospital in Winslow Township after assaulting a doctor and raping a fellow patient.

Lister and Seidel were housed together in 2 South A, the jail's 18-cell mental-health ward, despite their opposite dispositions. (Seidel's mental illness could make him a nuisance, friends and neighbors said, but the frail, former stockbroker was never violent.)

During a 50-minute window on Jan. 27, 2004, Lister raped Seidel and stomped him to death, causing multiple skull fractures and broken ribs, tearing his heart, and lacerating his liver.

"They never should have put Joel Seidel in a cell with Marvin Lister," Kline said. "And when they did, they sent him to slaughter."

Lister later told doctors that he had heard voices telling him to kill Seidel, and that he had thought he was acting in self-defense.

"I felt as big as Shaquille O'Neal," he said, according to a doctor's report. "I'm the Tasmanian Devil."

He was found not guilty of murder by reason of insanity in 2006, and he remains institutionalized.

Seidel's death was made even more tragic by a series of missteps and missed opportunities that could have prevented it.

Guards who were supposed to check the cells in 2 South A every 15 minutes left the inmates virtually unattended for 50 minutes on the morning of the beating.

An officer failed to keep a logbook, then filled in the entries after Seidel's death. Prosecutors found "inconsistencies" in the guard's after-the-fact account.

No criminal charges were filed against the guards, but three were disciplined.

At one of his two court hearings, Seidel showed up with black eyes. His condition alarmed the prosecutor enough that she twice warned jail officials about his condition.

She also took the unusual step of asking a Family Court judge to commit Seidel without a full evaluation.

At one of those hearings, Seidel had refused a voluntary 30-day commitment.

Four days before Seidel's death, the judge ordered an evaluation that could have sent Seidel to a hospital, but the process had not been completed when he was killed.

Since the death, the jail has refined its classification process to ensure that violent and nonviolent inmates are kept separate, even issuing them different-color jumpsuits.

The jail also has reduced crowding, added staff in the mental-health wing, and trained guards on dealing with the mentally ill.

The county has led a drive to keep people like Seidel out of the jail, pushing one program that trains police officers to identify mentally ill people on the street and help divert them into treatment.

A pilot version of the program is running in Collingswood, and the county will host a summit next month to encourage more towns to take up the idea.

"Alternatives to incarceration must be available to officers on the street, judges and other stakeholders in the criminal-justice system," Camden County officials said in a statement yesterday.

The statement also called Seidel's death "a tragedy," and said the case had been settled "to put the matter to rest for all concerned, including Mr. Seidel's family."

The statement again reiterated the changes spurred by Seidel's death.

"The tragedy here is that they weren't in place before Joel Seidel was killed," Kline said.