

By Randy Pennell
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Civil suit filed in Philly basement captive case

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — One of the alleged victims of a woman accused of holding mentally disabled adults captive in a benefits fraud scheme sued her aunt and the City of Philadelphia on Monday, claiming social workers should have informed a court the woman had previously been convicted of third-degree murder before placing her into the woman's custody.

Beatrice Weston's lawsuit echoes allegations she made on the stand during a pretrial hearing for her aunt, Linda Ann Weston, including that she was forced into prostitution after being placed into her aunt's care as a 10-year-old in 2002.

The lawsuit, which also names an attorney in the city solicitor's office and a Department of Human Services employee, alleges Linda Ann Weston should not have been able to gain custody of her niece because of a previous murder conviction, and social workers should have informed a judge of that conviction as part of custody arrangements.

Beatrice Weston's attorney, Shanin Specter, said his client's life would have turned out much different if the city had done its job.

"This would have been avoided if the city hadn't recommended that a convicted felon be given custody of a vulnerable, innocent child who was then terribly mistreated for years," he said.

Linda Weston spent eight years in prison after being convicted in the 1981 death of her sister's boyfriend, Bernardo Ramos. Authorities said she beat him and kept him locked in a closet until he starved to death.

A spokesman for Mayor Michael Nutter said the city doesn't comment on pending litigation. Linda Weston's attorney in her criminal case said he did not believe his client had obtained an attorney to handle civil litigation.

Beatrice Weston's suit alleges she was regularly beaten and starved during the 10 years she was in Linda Weston's custody and was forced to drink and bathe in her own urine.

Specter said Beatrice Weston was repeatedly beaten with a baseball bat and once with a hammer, losing teeth as a result.

Linda Ann Weston and three others were charged after a landlord discovered four people locked in a basement boiler room of an apartment house in the city's Tacony neighborhood. Prosecutors allege she and three co-defendants imprisoned four mentally disabled adults as part of a multi-state benefits fraud scheme.

Those four victims — Tamara Breeden, Edwin Sanabria, Derwin McLemire and Herbert Knowles — ranged in age from 29 to 41 at the time they were discovered.

Investigators say one of the basement captives was chained to the boiler and they were provided only a filthy bucket to relieve themselves.

Linda Weston's attorney, George Yacoubian Jr., said a trial date is currently set for late January, but it's possible federal charges could be filed before then.