

New Jersey Herald

County pays \$150K to settle ex-inmate's suit

By **Lori Comstock** New Jersey Herald

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The Sussex County Prosecutor's Office has opened an investigation at the Sussex County jail after a former inmate alleged in a lawsuit he was severely beaten by inmates arranged by a corrections officer.

In an settlement signed on Wednesday, nearly 21/2 years after the complaint was filed in state Superior Court, the former inmate and Vernon resident was awarded \$150,000 from the county.

First Assistant Prosecutor Greg Mueller said his office was compelled to open an investigation after learning of the alleged incident for the first time in the Sept. 29 edition of The New Jersey Herald.

The lawsuit, filed by attorney Jeff Patti on behalf of his client, Robert Woodruff, named various individuals as defendants including the County of Sussex, Sussex County Sheriff Michael Strada, former Undersheriff Homer Wanamaker and former Corrections Officer Leslie Port.

In the complaint, Woodruff alleged that while he was an inmate in the Sussex County jail, his jail cell was "purposefully" left open allowing three inmates to enter his open cell and "inflict a savage beating" on him, causing severe and permanent injuries.

Woodruff, who was incarcerated in the Warren County Jail awaiting transport to state prison for a four-year term on a burglary conviction, had been taken to the Sussex County jail against a judge's orders. A judge, the lawsuit states, had arranged for Woodruff to be held at the Warren County Jail because Port had been a victim of one of Woodruff's burglaries.

Woodruff alleged that after he was beaten, he was left to sit in his own blood and was refused medical treatment for 12 hours, according to the April 2015 lawsuit, and it wasn't until the next morning that he was brought to a dentist to get surgical sutures.

The lawsuit states that Woodruff "will endure and has endured severe pain and suffering, severe emotional trauma, humiliation and embarrassment and will in the future require medical treatment."

Patti, when contacted by phone on Thursday, said that it was his "fervent hope that the Sussex County Prosecutor's Office will look into the matter for criminal, official misconduct."

Strada, who declined to comment on the specifics of the alleged incident, stated that any and all incidents that take place at the county jail, no matter what they are, are investigated fully.

He also added that the investigation was not taken to the prosecutor's office at the time and that both Port and Wanamaker have since retired.

Freeholder Director Carl Lazzaro declined comment on Thursday. A call to county counsel John Williams, who represented Woodruff during his burglary case, was not returned by deadline.

The settlement includes no admission of guilt by the defendants.

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