

New Jersey Herald

Jail beating needs further investigation

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A settlement in an alleged jailhouse beating has been reached more than four years after the incident and more than two years since the lawsuit was filed.

And the county prosecutor's office is just now finding out about it. The freeholders themselves have just recently become aware of it.

How does that happen?

In the agreement signed on Wednesday, the county, through its insurance carrier, will pay \$150,000 to plaintiff Robert Woodruff, a former inmate of the Keogh-Dwyer Correctional Facility in Newton, settling a lawsuit filed by Woodruff in April 2015 in which he claimed he was severely beaten by three other inmates in a "hit" arranged by a corrections officer.

According to the complaint, Woodruff in March 2013 pleaded guilty to burglary and theft in state Superior Court. Because one of his victims was a corrections officer at Keogh Dwyer -- the Sussex County jail -- the court ordered Woodruff be held in the Warren County jail until sentencing and then transported to the custody of the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

However, on April 30, 2013, between sentencing and transfer to state custody, Woodruff was picked up at the Warren County jail and taken to the Sussex County jail, where, after processing, he was left in an unlocked, open cell. As soon as he was left alone, "three inmates entered his cell and immediately commenced to inflict a savage beating ... causing severe and permanent injuries," according to the complaint.

Further, the complaint claims Woodruff was denied medical treatment for 12 hours before being taken to a dentist the next morning.

The complaint said Sussex County jail employees and supervisors "engaged in willful and wanton misconduct and/or in reckless or callous indifference" to Woodruff's rights. The lawsuit sought compensatory and punitive damages as well as attorney's fees.

Charges of a jailhouse beating being condoned, even initiated by jail supervisors would seem to be a matter that would rise to the attention of the prosecutor's office. But Assistant Prosecutor Gregory Mueller late last week said the first his department was aware of the alleged beating, lawsuit and ultimate settlement was when it was published in The New Jersey Herald on Sept. 29.

This issue demands answers to all sorts of questions, and fortunately Mueller, now that he is aware of it, agrees.

The prosecutor's office has launched its own investigation into the matter.

The settlement between the county and the plaintiff includes the standard non-disparagement provision and no admission of guilt or liability.

But those clauses must not prevent the findings of the prosecutor's office investigation from being made public.