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Teen's death in Parma is ruled homicide

Cuyahoga coroner says Barberton girl choked while being restrained at treatment facility

By Rick Armon
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The death of a Barberton teenager at a Parma treatment facility last month has been ruled a homicide, the Cuyahoga County coroner said Monday.

Faith Finley, 17, suffocated and choked to death on her own vomit while being restrained by staff members, the coroner determined.

Finley died Dec. 13 at Parmadale Family Services, a Catholic Charities-run facility that treats youths with severe behavioral health and developmental problems. She was in the custody of Summit County Children Services at the time and had been placed there by the agency.

"For this kind of an outcome to occur is deeply, deeply concerning and frankly painful," Children Services Executive Director John Saros said after learning about the ruling. "This was a beautiful young woman who was sent there to receive treatment services.

"Parmadale always had an outstanding reputation for working with some pretty troubled kids, which is what makes this all the more terrible."

The coroner, Dr. Frank Miller, cautioned the public not to misinterpret the homicide finding. The ruling "merely means the death of an individual at the hands of another individual. Nothing sinister is being implied in this ruling," his office said in a prepared statement.

The coroner said Finley died "due to lack of oxygen that was exacerbated by choking on regurgitated stomach content." At the time, she was being restrained "after a reported outburst of disruptive behavior."

J. Thomas Mullen, president and chief executive officer of Catholic Charities, issued a statement saying the agency would cooperate with authorities.

"We continue our prayers and support for the young woman and her family," he said. "We, at this time, will wait for the legal process to move forward based on the coroner's finding and future actions."

He previously has said that workers don't use straitjackets, handcuffs or manacles to restrain children. Instead, staff members physically restrain them and are trained to use safe methods, he has said.

It is unclear whether the staff members who restrained Finley still are working at the facility. Mullen did not return a call seeking comment.

Family attorney Jill Flagg said Finley's mother, Antionette, was not shocked by the homicide ruling.

Antionette Finley remains heartbroken, Flagg said.

Faith Finley and her twin sister had been in county custody since last April because of unruly behavior. Her sister was at a different facility.

"In light of the medical examiner's findings, there's obviously been some wrongdoing and we'll continue to seek justice for this family," Flagg said.

Agencies investigate

The coroner's ruling has been shared with Parma police, which has been investigating Finley's death.

"We're still gathering facts," police spokesman Detective Marty Compton said. Police will sit down with the Cuyahoga County prosecutor after the investigation to determine if any charges should be filed, he said.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services also is looking into the incident. State investigators are at the facility and are expected to be there for the next few weeks, a spokesman said.

Summit County has stopped sending children to the facility.

After Finley's death, the county shifted five of its children to other treatment centers. Three people in the county's custody — all over the age of 18 — remain at Parmadale because it has been difficult placing them in other facilities, Saros said.

Ohio has a shortage of treatment facilities for troubled youth, he said.

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