

Guard charged in hospital beating in Lancaster

Nurses witnessed severe attack on prison inmate shackled to bed at LGH, complaints claim.

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By JACK BRUBAKER, Staff Writer

A Lancaster County Prison guard last August severely beat a prison inmate who had been shackled to a hospital bed, according to criminal and civil complaints.

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Silvestre Villarreal, a longtime prison guard who weighs about 200 pounds, climbed on a bed at Lancaster General Hospital and straddled the inmate, according to the complaint of a civil lawsuit filed a week ago.

The correctional officer repeatedly hit the inmate, Vance Laughman, until nurses intervened. He struck him so hard that he broke his own hand, according to the complaint.

Unnamed prison officials later offered Laughman \$5,000 to keep silent about the assault, the complaint says.

The suit targets Villarreal as the assaulting guard, prison Warden Vincent Guarini as a "deliberately indifferent supervisor," and the prison generally because it "has a history of allowing prisoner abuse."

Guarini did not respond to multiple telephone calls to the prison

Wednesday and this morning.

County Commissioner Scott Martin, chairman of the prison board, said he knows nothing about the case.

Villarreal, 57, of 1640 Chadwick Circle, could not be reached by telephone. A reporter found a "for sale" sign on his home's lawn this morning. No one answered the door.

A neighbor said that Villarreal left the house about three weeks ago, but his wife and daughter still live there.

Villarreal also is the target of a criminal complaint concerning the hospital assault. It was filed by Lancaster City Police last January.

Villarreal paid \$8,000 unsecured bail on a charge of simple assault in early April at a hearing before District Judge Janice Jimenez. He also was ordered to stay away from Laughman, who has been released from prison.

Villarreal waived a preliminary hearing before Jimenez and opted for a trial before the Court of Common Pleas. A trial date has not been set.

Villarreal is a "former employee" of the prison, according to the complaint in the civil suit filed May 20 in federal district court in Allentown. He was employed for "approximately eight years."

Former Lancaster County Prison inmate Paul Barbacano also sued Villarreal and two other correctional officers last October. His suit says the guards assaulted him while he was handcuffed in the prison.

The Laughman case is unusual because it allegedly took place in a hospital while hospital personnel observed. The reason Laughman was in the hospital is part of his lawsuit's complaint.

Laughman, 36, of 44 W. Liberty St., was serving a sentence of 3 to 23 months for stealing a car and robbing a PNC branch bank on Oregon Pike with a co-defendant in January 2007.

He has been in and out of prison since the early 1990s on charges of simple assault, theft, forgery and disorderly conduct.

As to the basic facts of what happened to Laughman on the night of Aug. 5, 2008, the civil and criminal complaints agree.

The considerably more detailed civil complaint was prepared by Leonard G. Brown III, who also prepared the Barbacano suit, and David R. Dye. They are attorneys with the Lancaster law firm of Clymer & Musser.

The Laughman lawsuit says Lancaster County Prison "has fostered a culture of ongoing unconstitutional abuse" and cites previous suits that Lancaster County settled with prisoners who said they had been abused by guards.

According to the court filing, "Guards known as 'gunslingers' routinely beat and abuse prisoners without control, accountability or discipline from supervisors. Guards who speak up against such abuse are marginalized into silence."

In Laughman's case, the abuse began with medical deprivation, according to the suit.

Laughman is bipolar and takes the prescription drug Depakote, a medicine used to treat seizures. Prison officials substituted "a cheaper, less effective drug, valproic acid," the suit says.

The new drug caused Laughman to develop pancreatitis, according to the suit. The suit says Laughman's pancreas must be removed, which will require him to take insulin as a diabetic for the rest of his life.

The suit says Laughman was sent to LGH for treatment of pancreas-related issues on the night of Aug. 4, 2008. The inmate was secured to his bed by a handcuff on his right hand and a leg shackle on his left ankle.

Villarreal was assigned as Laughman's guard, according to the suit.

When a nurse offered to administer insulin to Laughman, the inmate/patient turned it down because he knew an intravenous line for medicine already had been installed in his arm, according to the court filing.

After Laughman refused the injection, he heard Villarreal call a supervisor at the prison and say, "Laughman just tried to swing at me, OK to use force?" according to the suit.

Villarreal then approached Laughman, hit him in the head and told him to stop resisting, the suit says.

When Laughman protested that he was not resisting, Villarreal removed a belt holding his firearm, nightstick and chemical spray, crawled on top of the bed, straddled Laughman and "began to repeatedly punch him about the face, head and shoulders," according to the lawsuit.

During the assault, the suit says, Laughman drifted in and out of consciousness.

"Several nurses and hospital security personnel had to remove C.O. Villarreal from atop Mr. Laughman," according to the suit.

Villarreal broke his hand during the assault, according to the suit, and later received workers compensation for work time lost.

Laughman sustained bruises to his face and head and scarring on his left ankle because of the assault, according to the lawsuit's complaint.

After Laughman returned to jail, the court filing says, prison officials met with him to discuss the assault.

The officials offered Laughman \$5,000 "to not report the matter and not discuss the matter with the press or anyone else," according to the suit.

The lawsuit asks for unspecified nominal, compensatory and punitive damages on four counts, as well as attorney fees and costs.

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QUOTE (Lancaster Online @ May 28 2009, 10:55 AM)

Post your thoughts and comments about this article.

GOOD LORD! COULD SOMEONE PLEASE COVER THIS UP? IF WORD OF THIS GETS OUT NO ONE WILL WANT TO GO TO PRISON ANYMORE!

plugugly

SEE!

If this scumbag of a C.O. would have just had a taser he would'nt have broken his hand.

Damn tree-huggers.

As for the gang-banger survival on the inside question, LCP is a little jail. Full of dudes who didn't report a change of address, owe back child support, D.U.I stuff and a sprinkle of real offenders. It is far from an state prison enviroment and I would bet that most posters on here would be just fine in there without resorting to gang-banging.

cardpuller

QUOTE (DesignerK @ May 28 2009, 12:49 PM)

You're in jail. There's not much to argue with that, you obviously did something rediculous to get yourself there. Now do your time and stop complaining.

I'm sure almost every guard that works for a prison struggles every day to hold back the intense feelings they get when they see criminals who beat, rape, or murder women, children, or family members. Or what about those 20 year old, POS kids who roam our streets on drugs and think they're invincible and better than everyone despite the extensive criminal background they've had since they were 13.

I'd beat the snot out of him, too. But yet they get to sue for probably being dealt to them for at one point they may have done to someone else. I don't agree that someone that is supposed to be keeping the peace and stand as a figurehead should harm these prisoners, but don't let them think they deserve some kind of justice for it.

There are just too many unsatisfied people who always think "they deserve their slice of the pie". Lighten up and get real.

Your post makes no sense. First you seem to say he deserves what he got and you would've done the same thing as well, then you say you don't agree with a peace officer harming the prisoners. It's not the guards' job to punish the inmates for their crimes. The judge sentenced him to incarceration, not discipline as you see fit. I know what it's like in law enforcement and you have to put up with a lot of crap. Calling a superior officer and asking him to co-sign your beating of an inmate chained to a bed is cowardice and criminal.

steelhi82

Well for one reason,why is the SCUM BAG warden still on the job? When did this happen.....seems the commisioners need a wake up call also,including Mr Martin.All parties involved should be fired on the spot!When is this going to stop,people abusing their powers?Lets just see if the "good ole boyes" of Lancaster county have the balls to do something about this!(the commisioners) Come on taxpayers,here we go again,another law suit against the county and whos going to pay for it? We are.WAKE UP LANCASTER COUNTY TAXPAYERS!
Enough is Enough !!!!!

shopping bag

Why is he still on the job? Because he is in good with the good ol' boy regime that runs rampant County wide. These thugs are untouchable, and the voters keep them in power.

I could think of a few other departments that need a good cleaning as well.

SWWeiss

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