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## Trenton man sues over near-fatal stroke while in police lockup

*By Isaac Avilucea, The Trentonian*

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TRENTON >> It's déjà vu for two troubled city police aides whose actions allegedly led to a city man's death five years ago.

Trenton Police aides Jose Millan and Richard Reyes, who were charged but not convicted of allegedly covering up a police lockup death, are named as defendants in a second lawsuit alleging city police and Mercer County sheriff officers ignored an inmate who repeatedly requested stroke medication.

The man, Donyell Knight, suffered multiple seizures and a massive stroke and nearly died in police lockup in 2014, according to a recent lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Trenton.

Knight was not treated for two days, leading to partial blindness caused by a blocked carotid artery that cut off blood flow from his heart to the brain, the lawsuit says.

Knight's allegations are eerily reminiscent of police failures outlined in a wrongful death lawsuit the city of Trenton settled earlier this month with the family of Kenneth Howard.

Howard, who was being held in on warrants, died in police custody in 2011 after he fell ill and died while being left unattended in a cell for hours while officers watched the NFL playoffs. His death led to the filing of criminal charges against Trenton Police Officer Joseph Schiaretti and aides Millan and Reyes.

The three were accused of covering up Howard's death by tampering with records or falsifying reports after they neglected to do mandated cell checks. Prosecutors dropped the charges and the three men kept their jobs with the city.

[The city didn't acknowledge wrongdoing but settled with Howard's family this month for \\$690,000.](#)

### Similar case

While it is still in the early stages, the lawsuit paints a disturbing picture of a police department that allegedly did not learn any lessons or take steps to address failed policies and practices that resulted in Howard's death three years earlier.

In this case, Knight reportedly told Millan and Reyes and others about his medical needs while at city lockup but they shrugged him off and didn't get him treatment, the lawsuit said. Instead, police accused him of faking his illness, the lawsuit says.

An attorney who represents Knight said, thankfully, her client survived a near-fatal stroke after he was deprived of medical attention and stroke medication for days.

Roseland attorney Beth Baldinger told The Trentonian in a phone interview Wednesday she was aware of the settlement and would research parallels between her client's case and Howard's to determine whether city police have adopted a culture of indifference toward inmates.

After litigating police misconduct cases for more than 30 years, she said she has found these cases are not necessarily more common than they were decades ago. But people are more aware of police abuses because of social media, cell phone cameras and the influence of civil rights groups like Black Lives Matter, which have highlighted a string of police shootings across the nation.

"We're living in culture where police come under scrutiny in ways they haven't before," Baldinger said. "People are now seeing what is happening. This didn't just start. Only now it is coming under the microscope and we are seeing vocal outcry."

Knight's lawsuit also names city police director Ernest Parrey Jr., Mercer County Sheriff Jack Kemler and several police and sheriff officers.

The city does not comment on pending litigation.

### **Medical episode**

Knight claims that on June 9, 2014, around 2:30 p.m., he and his wife, Zelina, were arrested by Trenton Police despite being victims of a savage attack in which they were beaten by neighbors with a nail-lined wooden board.

Police responded to the 200 block of Hillcrest Avenue for a report of four black men allegedly armed with handguns. Police found the Knights' next-door neighbors setting off fireworks, according to the lawsuit. The neighbors quarreled with the Knights on their front porch and attacked the couple.

The Knights were also arrested after police determined all were responsible for the fight.

As they handcuffed and prepared to haul him off to police headquarters, Knight told officers he had a serious condition that required him to take medication on a "regimented" schedule to avoid having a stroke.

He asked police to let him to go inside to get his meds but police refused. Other family members told cops about Knight's medical condition but they didn't listen, the lawsuit says.

While in lockup, Knight told several police officers – including aides Millan and Reyes – he had been stabbed by the nail board. He asked for treatment and for his stroke medications, complaining of head pain and numbness.

The officers and aides "responded with gross and callous indifference," the lawsuit says.

From her nearby cell, Zelina Howard heard her husband's "cries and screams for help, panic and suffering," the lawsuit said. She heard police officers taunt and curse at her husband.

Two days later, while the couple was transported from city lockup to the county detention center in Hopewell, Zelina Howard noticed her husband couldn't walk or talk, was weak and had to be helped into the transport van, according to the lawsuit.

Zelina Knight told a nurse at the corrections center about her husband's condition. The nurse examined Donyell Knight and told authorities to take him to the hospital, the lawsuit says.

The police officers told the nurse Donyell Knight was "faking and playing games," the lawsuit says. One officer reportedly said, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime."

“I can’t account for the lack of empathy and positive conscious policing that occurs in these moments,” Baldinger said. “I don’t know what goes on in minds of officers who abuse their power.”

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