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Lawsuit: Ala. prison guards beat inmate to death

By PHILLIP RAWLS

The father of an Alabama inmate contends in a lawsuit filed Wednesday that prison guards beat his 24-year-old son to death last year, and records showed at least two of the officers attempted to cover up what happened.

The state lawsuit filed in Montgomery County blamed Prison Commissioner Richard Allen and numerous other officials for the death of Rocrast D. Mack. The lawsuit said seven officers hit, kicked and stomped Mack after he was handcuffed and unconscious, killing him.

“He was just beaten to death,” said lawyer Kenny Mendelsohn, who filed the lawsuit along with attorney Guy Hollis on behalf of Larry Mack.

Prison records listed Rocrast Mack as being 5-foot-11 and weighing 160 pounds. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison in February 2009 for a drug conviction in Montgomery County.

The lawsuit came one day after the Department of Corrections said it had fired two officers over Mack’s treatment at Ventress prison near Clayton, and four others resigned. Corrections officials say they’re asking state and federal prosecutors to look into criminal charges in Mack’s death.

Prison spokesman Brian Corbett said he could not comment on the lawsuit, but the department “does not and will not tolerate inmate abuse under any circumstances.”

The lawsuit seeks an unspecified amount of money.

Separately, state personnel records obtained by The Associated Press through an open records request show Lt. Michael A. Smith and Officer Melissa A. Brown were fired from Ventress in October after an investigation showed they violated several Department of Corrections rules, including using unauthorized physical force and “giving false information” about an investigation.

When the Department of Corrections announced Mack’s death in August, it said he “allegedly as-

saulted an officer and other officers had to intervene.” The personnel records portray it differently.

In Smith’s dismissal letter, Allen wrote that Smith responded to an officers call for help on Aug. 4, “and in doing so you acted irresponsibly and had a total disregard for truthfulness at all times, as well as, the inhumane treatment of an inmate. Your actions and abuse of authority resulted in life threatening injuries and eventually the death of the inmate.”

In Brown’s dismissal letter, the commissioner wrote that she did not give accurate information in interviews after the confrontation and “deliberately withheld the key factor that initiated the confrontation with the inmate.”

His letter said that when Brown was confronted with the evidence, “you admitted to striking the inmate first. This initial contact led to a sequence of events, involving several officers, nurses and a supervisor in the death investigation. You also admitted that the Lieutenant had advised you while you were being treated in the Health Care Unit to state that the Inmate struck you first.”

The records do not describe what happened before the officer struck the inmate.

Brown, who was hired in November 2008, had no reprimands in her state personnel file.

Smith was hired as a correctional officer in March 1997 and was promoted to lieutenant in November 2008. He had one reprimand in 2007 for unsatisfactory compliance with corrections rules, but no details were included in the records.

State personnel records show Smith has appealed his firing but Brown has not. Smith’s attorney, Angela Starr, did not immediately return a phone call seeking comment.

An attorney for the state Personnel Department, Tara Knee, said Smith’s appeal is on hold pending a criminal investigation.

Associated Press writer Jay Reeves in Birmingham contributed to this report