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LAKE SENTINEL

Carlton Palms facility for mentally disabled makes misleading reports, group charges

By JASON RUITER
ORLANDO SENTINEL | MAR 06, 2018



Carlton Palms is situated on about 50 acres of land, west of U.S. Highway 441 and south of Mount Dora, between farmland and lakes. (Lauren Ritchie/Orlando Sentinel)

Days after a man died from injuries he sustained while in the care of a Lake County facility for the severely disabled, an advocacy group released a report detailing the staff's "outright avoidance" to file accurate and timely patient injury records.

The report, released Monday by the group Disability Rights Florida, cited video footage at the for-profit Carlton Palms Educational Center that shows a staff member slapping a resident, documented instances of residents being restrained for hours for no apparent reason and highlighted differing accounts by a staff member after a resident suffered a black eye.

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"There's a certain culture there that either permits or doesn't acknowledge inaccurate reporting," said Amanda Heysteck, director of systems reform at Disability Rights, a federally funded organization.

The 33-page investigation was completed before the death Thursday of William James Lamson, 26, who was described as a "self harmer" who was "constantly banging his head," a Lake County sheriff's report said. The cause of death has not been determined pending toxicology tests, according to the medical examiner's office.

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His mother, Karen Lamson-Holmber, who lives in Fruitland Park about 25 miles northwest of the facility near Mount Dora, said she planned to visit her son March 23, his birthday, and bring him some of his favorite things.

"I was going to have a Reese's Peanut Butter cake, if that was possible, and the matching ice cream to go with it," she said, of her son, who had autism. "And pizza — he loved pizza."

The state Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Lake County Sheriff's Office and the state Department of Children and Families are investigating his death.

Lamson's death comes as Carlton Palms — the target of numerous abuse and neglect charges for years — faces renewed criticism from Disability Rights Florida for its handling of such reports.

> Complaints could not be resolved fast enough due to subsequent findings of abuse and neglect for Carlton Palms' residents
>
> — DISABILITY RIGHTS' INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

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Disability Rights reviewed 28 such allegations made in the first nine months of 2016. The nonprofit group said Carlton Palms staff routinely filed "misleading" incident and injury reports several days late.

In one case, a staffer admitted to slapping a patient after filing a report, approved by supervisors, that said "redirection, gloves [and an] emergency helmet" were used to calm and protect the resident. Video footage showed the staffer slapping the patient, who wasn't wearing a helmet.

Another resident was restrained for 3 hours and 40 minutes despite being "calm the entire time." Florida law prohibits the use of restraints as punishment or for staff's convenience.

Aerial view of Carlton Palms, west of U.S. Highway 441, near Mount Dora (2018/Google Images)

In its investigation, Disability Rights also was unable to get a straight answer as to why a resident had a black eye while he was placed into a mechanical restraint. Two differing reports about the event were made by the same person.

The resident, who later changed his story, first said he was punched in the face by a staff member.

The injury was reported to state authorities five days later, in violation of Agency for Persons with Disabilities' policies. Such injuries are supposed to be reported within one business day.

The number of complaints has been compounded by the fact that Carlton Palms is the only facility in the state licensed to care for such severely disabled patients, according to the report.

"While APD's [Agency for Persons with Disabilities] administrative complaints could not be resolved fast enough due to subsequent findings of abuse and neglect for Carlton Palms' residents, there were and are few options for individuals that require the kind of intensive and focused behavioral interventions as the residents at Carlton Palms," the report said. "When options are lacking, tolerance becomes an acceptable or necessary trait."

Lamson is the third person to die at Carlton Palms since 1997, when 14-year-old Jon Henley, who also had autism, was found dead in his bed with low levels of anti-seizure medicine in his blood, according to online investigative group, ProPublica.

In 2013, Paige Elizabeth Lunsford, a 14-year-old girl with autism from South Florida, died of dehydration brought on by stomach illness just days after arriving at Carlton Palms.

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Her death spurred a decision to place permanent state monitors at Carlton Palms, which is at the end of a rural road in the rural community of Lake Jem wedged between farmland and lakes.

A 2012 settlement agreement between four patients and Carlton Palms mandated video surveillance at the facility as well as opening it to random inspections.

Calls and messages seeking comment from Delaware-based Bellwether Behavioral Health, which owns Carlton Palms, were not returned.

> There is a plan to close the facility March, 2019
>
> — MELANIE ETTERS, COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR FOR THE STATE AGENCY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES.

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After another settlement agreement in 2016 spurred state officials to order the group home to close, Carlton Palms began transitioning its patients to smaller group homes near their families.

So far, 44 patients have been moved out of Carlton Palms and more than 100 still reside there, said Melanie Etters, communications director for the Agency for Persons with Disabilities.

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"There is a plan to close the facility March, 2019," she said.

Lamson's uncle David Lamson-Keene, who flew Tuesday from Richmond, Va., to Orlando, said he was outraged over his nephew's death.

"I'm angry and saddened for my brother [Lamson's father]," he said. "To hear his heartbreak — a father's heartbreak — was a lot."

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