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Teen's hanging in juvenile detention facility being probed

Austin Wallace
Austin Wallace

15-year-old had history of depression, his mother says

By J.J. Stambaugh
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State authorities said Tuesday they are investigating the death of a 15-year-old Halls High School student who was found hanged last week in a juvenile detention facility in Chattanooga.

The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation is leading the probe into the death of Austin D. Wallace, who was found dead Thursday

at the Hamilton County Juvenile Detention Center, authorities said.

The death has been labeled a suicide by the Hamilton County Medical Examiner's Office.

Austin lived much of his life in New Jersey with his father but moved in with his mother in Halls last summer after developing behavioral problems that included drug use, according to his mother, Heather Stein.

"He was a phenomenal guitar player,' Stein recalled. "He truly loved his family. While he was here he was such a sick boy that there wasn't a whole lot of fun in him. He was interested in becoming a welder like his father. ? He was such a big helper, a caring kid.'

Stein said she is angry that her son, who was supposed to be receiving drug treatment at a facility for teens in Hamilton County, was able to kill

"He had a bad past, but there is so much to this story,' she said. "We were trying to get him help.'

The teen was charged early this year with possession of marijuana, possession of drug paraphernalia and public intoxication, records show. He was subsequently charged with violating a court order and being a runaway, offenses that ensured he remained under the close supervision of the Knox County Juvenile Court system.

While at the Richard L. Bean Juvenile Service Center in Knoxville, Austin threatened to kill himself at least once and was prescribed several medications including anti-depressants and anti-psychotics.

According to Stein, she and Austin's grandmother, Lena Van Dyke, aggressively worked with authorities in trying to make sure that Wallace received appropriate treatment services. Over the past few months, Stein took him to be seen by experts at Peninsula Hospital, Cherokee Health Systems, and Helen Ross McNabb Center, she said.

Austin was eventually sent to the Scholze Center For Adolescents in Chattanooga for substance abuse treatment. He tried to escape several times before a final bid for freedom landed him in police custody June 29, Stein said.

On Thursday, the day after his grandmother suffered a heart attack from which she has not recovered, Austin was found dead inside the facility, which is operated by Hamilton County Juvenile Court, she said.

Stein thinks someone involved in her son's case made a horrific mistake.

"They knew he was a suicide risk,' Stein said. "Every time he's been (in custody) he's been on suicide watch.'

It was unclear whether Austin had been placed on suicide watch or how frequently he was checked by detention center staff because Hamilton

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The Hamilton County Sheriff's Office, for instance, and the TBI confirmed Tuesday they are probing Austin's death but released no details.

"This is an open investigation and it is also being reviewed by the TBI so no other information will be released,' said Janice Atkinson, spokeswoman for the Sheriff's Office.

Juvenile detention facilities are licensed by the state Department of Children's Services, which has also launched an investigation into Wallace's death, according to DCS spokesman Rob Johnson.

Investigator Kim Miller of the Hamilton County Medical Examiner's Office said Tuesday that Austin's death appeared to be a clear-cut case of suicide by hanging.

Austin left no suicide note, but "I know there were previous threats and attempts,' Miller said.

Austin's funeral will take place in New Jersey but his mother is considering having a memorial service in Knox County. She said that she is also trying to care for her mother, who is in critical condition at the University of Tennessee Medical Center.

Stein said that she feels gratitude to the many people who tried to help her son, from his case worker at Juvenile Court to the administration at Halls High School, where he was a sophomore.

She is nonetheless convinced that more could have been done to help her son.

"There's people in this that genuinely care, but there's also people in this who thought he was just another number,' she said.

His stepfather, Larry Stein, said Wallace was let down by at least some components of the juvenile system.

J.J. Stambaugh may be reached at 865-342-6307.

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