

# Corrections department settles with family of girl who attempted suicide

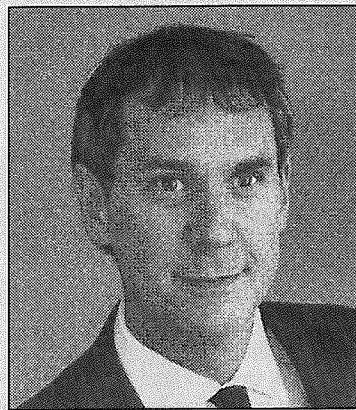
By Gabe Friedman  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

**L**OS ANGELES — The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has paid \$2.25 million to the family of a teenage girl who suffered severe brain damage from an attempted suicide while in custody at a state mental health facility.

The settlement appears to be one of the largest of its kind and resolves claims filed by the family of Shanelle Crawford. The lawsuit accused staff at the Ventura Youth Correctional Facility of negligence for allowing mental health wards to cover their room windows with bedsheets — a practice that allowed Crawford, 20, to attempt suicide.

The lack of oxygen to her brain for several minutes left Crawford with only minimal consciousness and dependent on a tracheotomy tube to eat.

"This case reveals that those in the CDCR with exclusive responsibility for caring for minors with disabilities were reckless," said Ronald Kaye of Kaye, McLane & Bednarski LLP, who represented Crawford's family. "It also shows that without lawsuits like this, such flagrant violations and lack of concern for



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minors' welfare would never be disclosed."

The settlement creates a \$1.1 million special needs trust for Crawford's future medical care, puts \$200,000 toward existing medical bills and pays \$900,000 to her attorneys.

There are approximately 1,100 juvenile wards in four youth correctional facilities in the state, according to the Department of Corrections.

Crawford, who ran away from her family in Texas, was 16 and had been in custody for less than two weeks at the time of the May 2008 incident.

Kaye and his associate, Kevin

LaHue, alleged she had been identified as a suicide risk and that guards should never have allowed her to place the bedsheet over her window.

CDCR attorney Susan Coleman of Burke, Williams & Sorensen LLP referred all calls to agency spokesman William Sessa.

Sessa could not recall other similar settlements but pointed out there has not been a successful suicide in CDCR juvenile facilities since 2005.

The CDCR did not admit any liability under the settlement, which received approval from a federal judge in August and was paid out this week.

Given the economic downturn and deep budget cuts, plaintiffs' lawyers speculated that there could be more lawsuits brought against businesses or state agencies that cut back on training.

"Anytime a business cuts back on training or cuts corners, you're going to see more injuries down the road, and that's going to lead to litigation," said David M. Ring of Ring & Taylor, a plaintiffs' side lawyer who was not involved in the case.

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