

Supervisors OK payouts over county jail lawsuits

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The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to pay \$1.55 million to settle three lawsuits involving the county jail system, including one that accused sheriff's deputies of beating a man who had gone to jail to visit a relative.

Supervisors also approved payouts to families of two inmates who died after allegedly receiving negligent medical care while in custody.

One settlement calls for the county to pay \$700,000 to relatives of Gustavo Ortega, a diabetic who had part of his right foot amputated while in jail and was released in 2004 without his medication or any means to get home.

Ortega curled up on a bench inside the lobby of the downtown Inmate Reception Center and lay there for three days before deputies called paramedics. He died a short time later of coronary artery disease, with diabetes, renal failure and high blood pressure listed as contributing factors. He had been jailed for drinking in public.

Another \$700,000 will go to relatives of William Louis Wilson, who was not examined by doctors after he was booked into County Jail in 2003 on suspicion of assault with a deadly weapon and spousal abuse. Wilson, 62, collapsed a few days later and died from blood clots in his lungs. Sheriff's Department pol-
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Supervisors OK payment to settle jail suits

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icy called for inmates 55 and older to go through thorough medical screenings.

Last month, The Times published a series of articles that found that the Sheriff's Department had failed to protect some vulnerable inmates from violence in custody and lacked enough medical staff to provide basic medical care for inmates.

Faulty care contributed to the deaths of at least 14 inmates since 1999, The Times found. Since 2000, another 14 inmates have been killed inside the county jail system, the nation's largest.

Supervisors also voted to award \$150,000 to Jamal Johnson, who accused jail deputies of beating and kicking him when he tried to visit a relative at the downtown Men's Central Jail in 2004. Johnson had gone to the jail to tell his cousin, an inmate, that the cousin's mother had died in a traffic collision.

Johnson alleged that deputies told him he couldn't visit his cousin, forced him against a wall and then punched and kicked him repeatedly after he asked if he was under arrest.

Lawyers for the county contended that Johnson had disobeyed deputies, used bad language and assaulted deputies, prompting them to act in self-defense. They said Johnson had become angry because deputies had canceled his visit because he had violated jail rules by bringing a cellphone into the visiting area.

The county has spent more than \$10 million since 2004 to resolve lawsuits filed by inmates who were injured or killed in custody. Sheriff Lee Baca said his department does the best it can with the resources it has in managing and protecting the nearly 200,000 inmates booked into custody each year.

"The cases that have been

settled are over a four- or five-year period. Over that same period of time the jails have treated hundreds of thousands of people successfully. Like any facility, any hospital, there are going to be those cases that are not successful," said sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore. "That said, one jail death is too many. Of course we regret whenever that happens."

Attorneys in recent lawsuits involving the jails say the Sheriff's Department fails to follow its own policies to protect inmates and appears unable to cope with the monumental task of caring for such a large number of inmates.

The Times reported last month that inmates, the vast majority of whom have not been convicted of a crime, often wait days or weeks for exams that they are supposed to receive within 24 hours of making a request. Twenty percent of inmates who ask to see a doctor are released from jail without ever being examined.

"They are overwhelmed by the medical population they see," said V. James DeSimone, attorney for the Wilson family. "Instead of being seen as a patient, he was seen as an inmate and therefore somehow expendable and easy to ignore."

R. Samuel Paz, attorney for the Ortega family, said the issue is not resources but deputies' lack of common sense and care.

"To leave him sitting there on a bench for three days, it just speaks to the fact that it really isn't short-handedness, it's insensitivity," Paz said.

The settlements came four weeks after the board voted to pay \$2.8 million to a child molestation suspect who was severely beaten in 2003 after deputies neglected to put him in protective custody.

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