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Section: B News

Claim filed in Crandon rampage
Attorney alleges superiors knew deputy was violent

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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Tyler Peterson's superiors in Forest County law enforcement knew he was prone to violence before he killed six people and himself in an Oct. 7 rampage, according to allegations made by an attorney seeking to hold Peterson's employers accountable for his crimes.

David Blau, a partner in a Milwaukee-based law firm, filed notices of claim this week against the Forest County Sheriff's Department and the Crandon Police Department, the two police agencies that employed the 20-year-old Peterson. The claims, filed on behalf of the parents of a victim, Jordanne Murray, accuse Police Chief John Dennee and Sheriff Keith Van Cleve of failing to supervise and control Peterson, who was a full-time deputy and part-time officer.

Similar claims are expected to be filed, likely today, on behalf of the parents of several other young men and women whom Peterson killed. They are being represented by former Attorney General Peg Lautenschlager, who now works for the **Lawton & Cates** firm in Madison.

Her clients include Charlie Neitzel, the only one to survive Peterson's barrage with an AR-15, a rifle he was issued as a member of the Forest County Special Emergency Response Team.

According to most accounts, Peterson went to Murray's apartment about 2 a.m. Oct. 7 and accused her of seeing another man. When she rebuffed him, he retrieved the AR-15 from his truck, smashed down the door to the flat and started firing at the group gathered there for a pizza party.

Murray, 18, Aaron Smith, 20, Bradley Schultz, 20, Lindsey Stahl, 14, Lianna Thomas, 18, and Katrina McCorkle, 18, all died in the apartment.

Roughly 12 hours after the murders, Peterson killed himself during a confrontation with members of the special response team that had surrounded him on a friend's property north of Crandon.

Expanding on the limited allegation of negligence cited in the claim, Blau alleged Thursday that Dennee and Van Cleve knew Peterson had acted out violently in the past.

"They knew about it, and they didn't act accordingly," the lawyer from Weigel, Carlson, Blau & Clemens said. "Either one of them could have intervened, and neither one chose to do so."

Blau refused to share his evidence or specific instances of Peterson's previous violent acts but assured "it's a character trait that will be easy to prove."

In the immediate aftermath of the killings, Dennee and Van Cleve maintained that the young deputy had shown no signs of uncontrollable temper or tendencies toward violence.

His record as a deputy was clean, save for a reprimand issued in September 2006 for failing to report an underage drinking party.

In November, Van Cleve directly responded to the rumors that Peterson had been referred for anger management classes because of his conduct.

"That's false," the sheriff said in a telephone interview.

He went on to defend the decision to hire Peterson, who did not undergo a psychological evaluation, and said people had positive impressions of the young man.

"The instructors said he was a great kid," Van Cleve said. "People looked up to him."

"He had a bad night, and he snapped and lost control of himself. What happened to him that night, only God will know."

In his first statement after the shootings, Dennee said: "I think it's important that you realize, we had no indications obviously, that anything like this would ever occur. This occurred as a shock to us, just as much as it did to anyone else."

Both Dennee and Van Cleve have confirmed, however, that a girl filed a complaint against Peterson several years ago, alleging he assaulted her. Both were juveniles at the time.

The complaint was determined to be unfounded, and Forest County District Attorney Leon Stenz chose not to pursue a delinquency petition or criminal charges against Peterson.

Stenz refused to share any details about the allegation. To date, Stenz and the

sheriff's officials have not responded to an open records request seeking the investigative reports on that complaint, which dates back roughly four years.

Records generated through the investigation into his killing spree also remain outside public purview at this point, nearly four months removed from the crimes.

The Department of Justice, directed by Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen, has denied requests seeking autopsy reports on the victims, witness statements, the results of ballistics tests and the reports prepared by investigators in the Division of Criminal Investigation.

Release of the information would interfere with the ongoing investigation, according to a letter written by the records custodian on Nov. 29.

The investigation, however, appears to be concluded, according to Stenz, the prosecutor in Forest County.

He has reviewed the final report sent to him by the Division of Criminal Investigation and has said he does not expect to file any criminal charges in the case. No formal announcement has been made.

Kevin St. John, spokesman for Van Hollen's office, said the attorney general expects to hold a news conference as early as next week to wrap up the case and release the records.

Some of the relatives have been running out of patience.

They had been told that Van Hollen would have a news conference on Jan. 29, but that was pushed back without explanation and no information, including autopsy reports, has been shared.

"I think the families are getting discouraged," said Sharon Pisarek, an aunt of Bradley Schultz. "It's been four months."

"It almost makes you feel like he's trying to hide something; something just doesn't seem right," Pisarek said.

Notices of claim are often precursors to civil lawsuits.

Patrick Marley of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

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