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## Attorneys: \$750K sought from prison over suicide

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SUNBURY - A \$750,000 private settlement is sought by the widow of a Shamokin man who committed suicide in June inside Northumberland County Prison.

If a settlement is not reached, a federal lawsuit will be filed within 30 days.

Attorneys Kymberley Best and Tim Bowers made the demand in a letter sent Tuesday to prison board members on behalf of Hope Lewis, 38. Her husband, Cyrus, 34, hung

himself inside a cell on June 15.

Best said she knows prison staff failed to follow suicide prevention policy and procedures because she helped craft them herself when she worked as a county solicitor.

"I'd really like the residents, the commissioners and members of the prison board to know that we're way past measuring these lawsuits in dollar amounts; they're now measured in lives," Best said Wednesday, referencing another lawsuit by the family of a suicide victim.

Lewis was jailed June 9 following an attempted vehicle theft in Shamokin.

was addicted to alcohol and heroin, and was in withdrawal, his wife, Hope, told The News-Item on June 30.

Lewis was on 30-minute checks of his jail cell. Prison Warden Roy Johnson said previously that Lewis was found with a bedsheet wrapped around his neck from a windowsill 27 minutes after the last check. The duty nurse responded and checked Lewis' vitals. A defibrillator and CPR were used in attempts to revive him until ambulance personnel arrived. He was pronounced dead at Sunbury Community Hospital. Johnson had said it's likely Lewis died before he was found.

Johnson would not comment in the days after the suicide on whether or not Lewis was on suicide watch, citing federal privacy regulations.

There are two enhanced levels of supervision - constant supervision and 15-minute checks - for inmates believed to be at risk or in withdrawal. Those inmates would be provided smocks designed to prevent hanging.

Best said prison staff erred in placing her client's late husband on anything but a suicide watch. He shouldn't have had a bedsheet and he should have been on constant video surveillance. Had he been placed on watch, she said he would have had immediate access to a psychiatrist.

There are circumstances where a person intent on committing suicide will carry that out, Best acknowledged. Often it comes as a surprise. There was no surprise in Lewis' case, Best said.

Lewis had admitted having attempted to kill himself when he crashed Hope Lewis' stolen vehicle a week prior, his wife said previously. Best said it had been recommended by hospital staff that Lewis be taken for inpatient psychiatric help.

Best said the current suicide policies in place came as a result of a 2010 settlement with the Lewisburg Prison Project in the wake of the 2006 suicide of Ryan Francis.

It was seven years before the next suicide, when Andrew W. Beers, 27, of Paxinos, hung himself inside the prison in August 2013. His family has also filed a lawsuit.

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Johnson has come under fire by county Commissioners Stephen Bridy and Vinny Clausi for two suicides having occurred within 10 months, among other issues. Johnson has defended his staff and has said policy was correctly followed.

Best said the \$750,000 figure is based on awards from other jury trials with similar circumstances.

Hope Lewis was unavailable for further comment after being advised by Best to withhold speaking to the media considering the potential litigation.

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