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Northumberland County coroner finishing inmate death probe

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SUNBURY - Video footage from inside Northumberland County Prison shows Andrew W. Beers was alone in his cell in the moments before he had hanged himself, the county coroner said Thursday.

There were no cameras pointed directly into the two-man cell. However, Coroner James F. Kelley said he reviewed other footage recorded at the prison. He watched to be sure no one else was inside the cell with Beers before his body was discovered.

"My main concern was that his death did not come at the hands of someone else. I'm satisfied that it did not," Kelley said. "Nobody else had entered that cell from the last time he was viewed."

Beers was found dead Tuesday three weeks after he was incarcerated in the prison. He had left behind what Kelley described as "two personal notes to loved ones." The coroner wouldn't comment on the content, saying the information is only for the family.

Another source said off the record the notes indicated Beers was contemplating suicide.

Kelley left the prison with additional video footage and several staff reports to review. While he has ruled the death a suicide, his investigation continues. Once it's finalized, the coroner's report will be turned over to the county district attorney's office.

Suicide policy

Beers, 27, of Paxinos, was found dead about 5:30 p.m. Tuesday by his cell mate who had returned from recreation, Warden Roy Johnson said.

Beers had used a bed sheet to hang himself from a steel window frame, and attempts by prison staff to revive him were unsuccessful.

Beers had been jailed since July 23 on felony theft charges. He was transferred from an eight-man cell Monday after an issue arose with another inmate. He'd made a request in writing for "protective custody" over the weekend and again spoke to a sergeant on the matter Monday, at which point the warden said Beers was moved.

A mental health professional from PrimeCare Medical Inc., the county's contracted in-prison medical provider, also visited with Beers on Monday, Johnson said, and the inmate gave no indications that he intended to harm himself.

A representative from PrimeCare decline comment on the Beers case, specifically.

Todd Haskins, vice president of operations for PrimeCare, said the firm would conduct its own peer review of the suicide. Its determination, however, would not be made public.

Haskins said all inmates are screened for suicide prevention upon intake. They're asked a series of questions, both medical and mental health. The outcome of a mental health evaluation is used to determine the likelihood of self-harm, he said.

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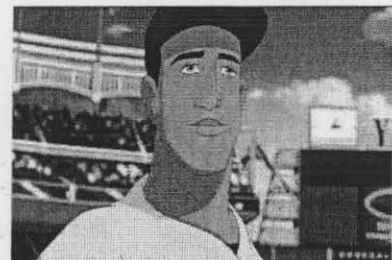
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Inmates can also be placed on suicide watch at any time, Haskins said. Johnson said previously that would include a video camera being pointed directly into an inmate's cell and the inmate wearing a smock meant to prevent hanging.

In Beers' case, Johnson has said he never indicated any suicidal thoughts to security or medical staff. As such, suicide watch measures were not taken.

David Sprout, a paralegal with the prisoner advocacy group Lewisburg Prison Project, said a stint in any jail, short-term or long-term, can have enormous impact on a person's psyche.

"People don't realize what that does to you (going to prison). When they shut that door behind you, it really can affect people differently," Sprout said.

He said he has plans to meet soon with prisoners on unrelated topics and hopes to speak with Johnson about policy and procedure regarding inmates with potential suicide risk.

"Our thought is, are their policies being followed?" Sprout said.

The Northumberland County Prison is old, Sprout said, and "physically depressing." He said he believes Johnson is doing the best he can.