

Jail cleared in death of ex-EHS star

By CINDY SWIRKO

Sun staff writer

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A grand jury found several areas of concern about procedures at the Alachua County jail during an inquiry into the death last year of a teen-ager, according to a report unsealed Wednesday.

Jail staff was cleared of any wrongdoing in the death of Mark Burkett, 18, who was brought to the jail by police in a violent and mentally unstable condition, police said.

Burkett was a linebacker on the Eastside Rams football team. He was described by friends at his funeral as easygoing and hard-working.

Medical Examiner William Hamilton said Burkett died of "acute exhaustive mania," described as the sudden inexplicable death of someone with psychotic disorders following violent outbursts.

"The grand jury found no criminal liability toward the death but gave some constructive comments concerning actions the jail might take to better address situations of this sort in the future," State Attorney Bill Cervone said. "There are general concerns about how we deal with people who are mental health patients in the jail. Unfortunately, there is not a safe, stable place where a violent, mentally ill person who has committed a criminal offense can be taken."

The grand jury recommended that a secure spot at the jail be modified for inmates who are violent because of extreme mental health conditions.

Also recommended was increased employee training for both medical personnel and for jail staff who have to deal with inmates in medical situations.

Policies regarding the use of inmate restraints in medical cases also are recommended, along with exact procedures concerning the timing and method of court orders such as the drawing of blood.

Sheriff Steve Oelrich said he is considering the suggestions but said the department does not have the money to implement some of them.

"We're very flexible and open to suggestions, but we have finite funds and a finite facility. I'm up to all these considerations with input from medical people, but we would have to get funding," he said. "My people, even with all this going on, never hit or beat him. I thought they used amazing restraint."

Burkett was jailed June 13 when his mother called police to take him to a private mental health facility, police said.

Burkett became violent as police took him to a car. He head-butted his father and nearly bit off the thumb of an officer, police said.

A psychiatrist who evaluated Burkett at the jail believed he was exhibiting psychotic behavior, the grand jury report said.

Burkett was uncooperative and violent with jail staff when they tried to take him to his first court appearance and to draw blood from him, police said. He was shot in the morning and afternoon with an electric Taser gun, the grand jury report said.

After a struggle with jail staff, Burkett went into respiratory distress, the grand jury reported. Burkett was taken to the hospital. He never regained consciousness and died June 17.

Cindy Swirko can be reached at 374-5024 or Cindy.Swirko@gainesvillesun.com
<<mailto:Cindy.Swirko@gainesvillesun.com>>.