

# Attack costs two inmates \$10 million

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LANCASTER - A 25-year-old California correctional officer who was almost killed by two inmates in what has been characterized as the worst attack in the history of California State Prison Los Angeles County has been awarded more than \$10 million in the first civil lawsuit of its kind to be brought into Los Angeles Superior Court.

The judgment of \$10,253,792.57 was entered March 3 after the two defendants failed to adequately file formal responses with the court, said Lancaster-based attorney R. Rex Parris, who represented prison guard Demond Blunt in the proceeding.

Although the default judgment likely never will be paid, representatives for the California Staff Assault Task Force said the decision will help their campaign against prison violence by making inmates more accountable for attacks on employees. While the task force already had racked up 60 small-claims lawsuit wins against inmates who injured prison staff in California, the victory in the Superior Court lawsuit was seen as a landmark.

Blunt, a 2½-year employee with the prison system, was attacked April 2 as he walked across the exercise yard of the Lancaster facility with his hands full of mailbags.

Charles Hughes, who heads the assault task force, said Blunt was knocked down and kicked in the head by booted inmates Gregory P. Gaines and Harold X. Wesley for three to five minutes. Hughes had to be airlifted from the prison to Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Mission Hills.

The husband and father of two young children remained in a coma for four days. He still is undergoing rehabilitation for his injuries, he said in his civil suit, and may never be able to return to his career.

Task force head Hughes said, "I know in my heart that these two inmates will never have another dollar that won't have Demond Blunt's name on it. Basically, it's not about the money. It's about holding these inmates accountable."

"Inmate assaults on prison staff average 9.8 a day in California," Hughes said. "The task force is committed to seeing that number substantially reduced."

The award follows a recent report from the Office of the Inspector General concerning the circumstances surrounding the Jan. 10 stabbing death of correctional officer Manual A. Gonzalez Jr. at the California Institution for Men in Chino.

The slaying of Gonzalez, a father of six from Whittier and a 16-year veteran of the state Department of Corrections, was the first killing of a prison officer on duty in 20 years.

Inspector General Matthew L. Cate found a "host of security problems at the prison led up to the attack" by Jon Christopher Blaylock, a 35-year-old inmate serving a 75-year term for the 2002 attempted murder of a police officer.

"In the housing unit where the stabbing occurred, correctional officers, including Gonzalez, routinely ignored security protocols and disregarded extra security measures put into place after a December riot between black and Hispanic inmates," Cate reported. Just before he was attacked, Gonzalez was found to have "violated protocols by allowing Blaylock to be released from his cell because he believed (the inmate) was a shot-caller who would help calm other black inmates and return the unit to regular programming."

With Blaylock out of his cell, Gonzalez entered the tier alone to speak with the inmate, at which time the attack occurred, the Inspector General reported.

Another problem cited in the report as a possible contributor to the assault included housing of the inmate. Blaylock was kept in a general population cell despite his previous classification as a maximum-security inmate with a long history of in-prison violence, who should have been assigned to an administrative segregation unit.

The investigation found inmates at the facility enjoyed easy access to weapons-making materials because the unit "is in serious disrepair, and control over tools and other equipment is lax." Also cited were administrative delays in distributing protective vests to officers designated to receive them.

At the time of the stabbing, Gonzalez's vest was stored in a warehouse while prison officials worked to update their protocols. This state of affairs prompted representatives from the California Correctional Peace Officers Association to declare soon after the incident that "the fatal stabbing could have been prevented if the officer had been issued a stab-proof vest the union was trying to obtain for its members through the grievance process."

Cate concluded that "no one can say whether any of these problems cost Officer Gonzalez his life, but certainly they need to be remedied before any other officer faces similar peril."

In response to the findings, California corrections officials placed Warden Lori DiCarlo and two chief deputies on paid administrative leave and announced the launch of an extensive review of prison operations. Inmate Blaylock has been charged in the case by the San Bernardino County district attorney, who plans to seek the death penalty.

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