

Guard wins inmate suit

1st case with prisoners accountable for attack

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LANCASTER -- A Lancaster state prison correctional officer who was repeatedly kicked in the head by two inmates was awarded more than \$10 million in a civil lawsuit called the first of its kind.

While Correctional Officer Demond Blunt is unlikely to see any of the \$10,253,792.57 default judgment, leaders of a correctional officers' organization said it is the first step in holding inmates accountable for their actions.

"I have stuff I'll have to live with for the rest of my life because of this attack," said Blunt, 25, who said he remains paralyzed on his right side and expects to take a medical retirement. "I'm just glad that they will never have anything if they ever get out of prison."

Blunt was attacked on April 2, 2004, by inmates identified as Gregory P. Gaines and Harold X. Wesley, his attorneys said. Blunt was knocked to the ground and kicked.

Blunt was in a coma for four days, his attorneys said.

Gaines, 21, is serving 13- and 18-year sentences for attempted robberies. Wesley, 30, is serving a 34-year sentence for multiple rape convictions. Prosecutors declined to file charges for the attack on Blunt, saying there was insufficient evidence to prove Wesley and Gaines were the culprits.

The men have been sent to other prisons and are being kept in administrative segregation, in which they are locked in their cells for 23 hours a day.

Lancaster attorney R. Rex Parris, whose firm represented Blunt in his Los Angeles County Superior Court lawsuit, said the judgment will send a message to inmates that attacks on prison employees will carry punishment that doesn't end with release or parole.

"It's not about the money, it's all about the accountability," said California State Prison-Los Angeles County Lt. Charles Hughes, who started the California Staff Assault Task Force to help officers who were assaulted. "I've been assaulted numerous times so this is something near and dear to my heart."

Hughes added: "These two inmates will never have anything in their lives that doesn't have Officer Blunt's name on it."

Hughes said he formed the assault organization 1 year ago to raise money to help officers' families and to support civil lawsuits against inmates who assault guards. The group now has about 5,800 members, he said.

In Blunt's case, the task force flew Blunt's wife and daughter from Texas to California so they could be with him. They then arranged for Parris to handle the lawsuit.

"We basically just put money into a pot to care for the family and pay for attorneys," Hughes said.

The task force members have won 60 small claims lawsuits against inmates who injured prison staffers. Blunt's award is by far the largest.

"We don't press the 'he bumped me' type assaults," Hughes said. "It's the assaults where we get punched or kicked or urine or feces thrown at us -- the really atrocious assaults."

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