



## Stahl family settles wrongful-death lawsuit against city, county



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The family of a Billings nurse who was killed by a drunken young motorist being chased by police has agreed to settle their wrongful-death lawsuit for \$400,000.

Billings attorney Chris Edwards, representing the family of 27-year-old Lillian Stahl, said the settlement was reached Friday. Under the settlement, the city of Billings and Yellowstone County will each give the family \$200,000.

"They're very satisfied with the settlement," Edwards said of the Stahls. The suit was filed by Lillian's brother, Arnie Stahl, who argued that police officers and sheriff's deputies violated their own pursuit policies, resulting in the death of Lillian Stahl on the morning of April 18, 2008.

Edwards said the Stahl family has been down "a tough road" and is mainly relieved to have settled the lawsuit.

"They took some grief from the community for filing a suit against the city and the county and they stuck with it," Edwards said.

Brendon Rohan of Butte, the attorney hired by the city's insurance carrier to represent the city, said the city accepted no blame for Stahl's death in the settlement.

"There was no admission of liability and the city continues to maintain that the tragic death of Lillian Stahl" was solely the result of "the criminal conduct of Brian Houston," Rohan said.

Houston, then 17, was the driver who sped through a stop sign at Sixth Street West in his GMC Jimmy and broadsided Stahl's car. She was heading east on Grand Avenue, making her way to work at 7 a.m.

Deputy Yellowstone County Attorney Kevin Gillen said the city and county reached independent settlements with the Stahl family and will sign separate releases to settle the case, which had been scheduled for trial on Tuesday.

Like Rohan, Gillen said "Brian Houston killed Miss Stahl," but county officials thought it was "in the best interest of the taxpayers of this county to find a resolution."

And though the county continues to believe that Houston was solely responsible for Lillian Stahl's death, Gillen said, "We hope the settlement we've agreed to can bring some kind of closure to the Stahl family, because she was truly an innocent victim."

On the morning of the accident, Stahl was on her way to work as an operating-room nurse at Billings Clinic. Houston was fleeing from city and county officers after a night of drinking. Stahl died at the scene from internal injuries. Houston and another teenager in the Jimmy survived the crash with minor injuries.

Houston was charged as an adult with negligent vehicular homicide and other felonies. He eventually pleaded guilty to the charges, and in October 2008 Judge Susan Watters sentenced him to 20 years in prison.

The lawsuit filed by Arnie Stahl said the chase that ended Stahl's life never should have taken place. It also alleges that the two law enforcement agencies recognized the policy violations and provided a "blatantly false" account of the events to the public.

According to a timeline laid out in the lawsuit, the pursuit of Houston began when police Sgt. Mark Kirkpatrick, driving an unmarked patrol car, saw Houston involved in a minor accident involving a garbage can and a pickup truck.

Kirkpatrick began to follow the Jimmy even though Police Department policy prohibits unmarked cars from engaging in pursuits except in "extreme circumstances," according to the lawsuit.

Sheriff's Capt. Bill Michaelis was driving to work and joined the pursuit after overhearing Kirkpatrick's radio reports, and they were joined by other officers and deputies, some coming at high speed from miles away.

The lawsuit said no more than two patrol cars are to be involved in a pursuit at any given time, and it accused the Police Department of issuing a press release that "materially misrepresented" the facts of the case, particularly in regard to when Michaelis called off the chase.

The Stahl family maintained in the suit that deputies and officers continued to chase Houston into the intersection where the wreck happened.



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