

## **3 fired, 3 suspended in State Hospital suicide case**

BY AMY UPSHAW, ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The State Hospital fired three nurses and suspended three other employees for failing to follow procedures after a patient hanged herself in late October, state officials said Friday.

The woman, 41-year-old Brenda Shelton, died five days later from her injuries, the Pulaski County coroner's office said.

"Both the administrative staff at the hospital and leadership staff in the [Behavioral Health Services Division], after having reviewed the situation, felt like swift and decisive action was warranted," said Julie Munsell, a spokesman for the state Department of Human Services.

The State Hospital disciplined the employees Thursday afternoon.

Munsell declined to release the names of the nurses who were fired or the two mental health workers and the State Hospital police officer who were suspended, citing a policy that allows the workers to appeal.

She also declined to release details about what happened and the specific policies that were broken Oct. 25, the day Shelton hanged herself with a bed sheet in her room.

However, Munsell said the department has no reason to believe that there was any "malicious intent" on the part of the disciplined employees.

Munsell said it is possible that the internal investigation, which is not complete, will be sent to the Arkansas State Police for a criminal investigation, depending on what is found.

Thus far, she explained, the department has looked only at how the employees responded to what happened, not whether Shelton's death could have been prevented.

According to a redacted department report, Shelton did her laundry that Saturday afternoon "while saying she was eager to visit with her mother."

Her mother, daughter and a friend visited for about an hour before Shelton joined a karaoke party about 3:15 p.m. and began dancing.

Two hours later, according to the report, an unidentified person yelled for help from Shelton's room, and a nurse found her hanging from the bathroom door, blue-faced and unresponsive.

She was taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital, where she died Oct. 30.

Munsell said Jay Bradford, director of the department's Behavioral Health Services Division since February 2007, called a meeting to analyze the situation a day after Shelton was found.

"The folks out there didn't wait a period of time to conduct the full investigation [before making personnel decisions]," Munsell said.

"I think that's an important piece of accountability, and that is directly under Jay's leadership. He called them together on the weekend to begin looking at it immediately.

"That has not always been the case."

Dana McClain, a senior attorney with the Disability Rights Center based in Little Rock, who is sometimes critical of the department, agreed.

“That was a change to see from them, and a good change,” said McClain, whose center monitors the State Hospital weekly. “If they’re seeing things serious enough to fire somebody before they finish an investigation - and they’re willing to do that - that’s a very good thing.”

In years past, McClain said, she didn’t see many State Hospital employees fired.

She attributed the action taken Thursday afternoon to changes made in the past couple of years in the way the State Hospital conducts investigations.

“Their investigations have been much more thorough,” she said. “They were upfront in their investigations in what they found and the remedies they sought.”

Still, McClain said any death is one too many.

Shelton’s death was the third suicide at the State Hospital in 19 years.

“Anytime there’s a death, whatever you do is not going to fix it,” she said.

“But you certainly hope they’re doing the things they need to do. For investigative purposes, [the State Hospital] is.” Information for this article was contributed by Jim Brooks of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

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