

State Hospital staff faulted over suicide-try response

BY AMY UPSHAW, ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

After workers at the Arkansas State Hospital discovered a patient dying from a suicide attempt, nurses and other employees did not start CPR immediately, according to documents obtained by the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

Instead, the State Hospital police officer who found Brenda Shelton hanging from a sheet “stepped back” and ran toward the nurses’ station. When officer Rosa Brazeal returned, she helped get Shelton down and then paced outside the door, according to a timeline.

A mental-health worker who arrived seconds later reportedly panicked, and “started screaming and holding onto the wall.”

“I didn’t have any role [in giving Shelton CPR], because I probably would have needed it myself,” mental-health worker Carol Roberts later told investigators. She said seeing Shelton reminded her of a similar instance but did not elaborate.

Seconds later, an unidentified nurse entered and then left the room without initiating CPR.

Shelton’s suicide attempt happened Oct. 25. The 41-year-old mother died at University Hospital five days later.

More than a minute lapsed before a nurse began chest compressions. The nurses did not begin rescue-breathing measures for four minutes because they could not find an “AMBU bag,” which is placed over a person’s mouth to assist in breathing.

The bag had been accidentally locked in a closet by a nurse responding to calls for help.

Hospital regulations require nurses to give basic life-saving measures even if they don’t have a manual ventilator or a breathing barrier, which is plastic and is placed over a person’s mouth during mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

After Shelton’s death, the hospital bought employees portable masks that fold up and attach to their key chains.

The Department of Human Services, which is responsible for the State Hospital, fired three nurses in November over their handling of the situation. Human Services has not released the names of the three nurses because their grievances are still being heard, said department spokesman Julie Munsell.

Human Services officials also suspended Brazeal, Roberts and State Hospital officer Oscar Fairrow for three days without pay because their responses to the situation “failed to reflect appropriate emergency response expected ... especially during a life-threatening patient event.”

Roberts was later fired for “gross misconduct” in an unrelated incident, Munsell said.

Munsell declined to release details about Roberts’ firing because of her grievance rights.

Shelton’s daughter, Amber Shelton, said in an interview Tuesday that her mother was a good woman who’d suffered from depression for years. Much of the depression centered on the loss of one of her children years ago, Amber Shelton said.

“She struggled with it all through my life,” she said, adding that her mother’s recent divorce had only compounded the situation.

Two weeks before Shelton took her life, her sister had checked her into a private mental-health hospital because Brenda Shelton was suicidal.

After four or five days, Amber Shelton said the private hospital “rushed” her mother out of the facility. Amber Shelton suspected it was because her mother didn’t have insurance.

“That was the first time she went into the hospital [for depression],” her daughter said. “I always knew she was depressed, but I never knew it was that bad.”

Once she was out, Amber Shelton said her mother tried to return to work at her retail-sales job but was told by her employers that they could not keep her on because of her situation.

Soon after, she was taken to the State Hospital.

According to the investigative file, Brenda Shelton was not on suicide watch the day she hung herself. Her parents had visited her, and during the visit, she’d cried, the file shows.

However, later that afternoon she participated in karaoke with some of the other patients.

When Brazeal went to Brenda Shelton’s room about 5 p.m. to usher her to dinner, she found Shelton hanging from the bathroom door. Shelton’s roommate would later tell employees that Shelton had threatened to kill herself a few days earlier. The roommate had not told anyone.

An unidentified registered nurse entered and left the room twice before starting chest compressions. Another nurse told investigators that she would start mouth-to-mouth since there was no AMBU bag, but was “advised not to.”

By then, Fairrow had been standing at the door with Brazeal.

Farrow later told investigators the situation should have been handled better.

“Lots of people that was on that unit, I felt they was in the wrong places at the wrong time,” he said. “When I arrived there somebody should have already been in that room working and they wasn’t.”

Attached to Fairrow’s suspension letter was a hand-written note in which he apologized for not doing more.

“If this happens again,” he wrote, “I will be [prepared] to be the best help I can be.”

Though Amber Shelton said she hasn’t been given any answers about what happened that day with her mother, she said she is happy that Human Services acted so swiftly in punishing those who failed her.

“I think it’s good they actually fired somebody,” she said.

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