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# Connecticut to pay \$9 million to settle suit over the abuse, psychological ‘torture’ of patient at state psychiatric hospital

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*FILE — The Whiting Forensic Division maximum-security psychiatric hospital, in Middletown, Conn., is shown in this photo, Sept. 15, 2017. A Connecticut judge has approved a \$9-million settlement between the state and the brother of a man who was abused numerous times at the state's maximum-security psychiatric hospital, lawyers in the case announced Thursday, June 30, 2022. (AP Photo/Dave Collins, File) (Dave Collins/AP)*

Connecticut has settled a \$9 million lawsuit in the case of William Shehadi, a mentally ill man whose physical and psychological abuse, while he was a patient at the state's maximum-security psychiatric hospital, were captured on video.

The settlement, approved by a Connecticut judge and announced Thursday, is the largest ever to be paid to an individual by the state.

The multi-million-dollar settlement, filed by Shehadi's brother and conservator, Albert Shehadi, against the state, the State Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and its commissioner and 11 Whiting employees and administrators, was approved by Superior Court Judge Barbara Bellis.

In more than 50 incidents of abuse over 24 days, attorneys for Albert Shehadi say William Shehadi was hit, kicked, doused with liquids, forced to wear a diaper on his head and "psychologically tortured" by nurses and staff at Whiting Forensic Hospital, according to records.

The state-run facility in Middletown specializes in inpatient services for individuals with mental health conditions who are involved in the criminal justice system, including those who are deemed not guilty by reason of insanity.

Evidence of the regular abuse he endured led to the arrests of 10 Whiting staff members and the dismissal of more 35 employees, including the Whiting Chief of Patient Care Services whose employment was terminated for their role in the abuse. They also paid an additional undisclosed sum to Albert Shehadi in a settlement.

Shehadi's attorney, Antonio Ponvert III of the Bridgeport-based firm Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder, said that the goal of the lawsuit against the state and the staff "was to hold abusers and State officials accountable for the torture of a profoundly vulnerable human being who depended upon them for treatment and care."

"No person is above the law, especially those who are responsible for our most helpless citizens," said Ponvert.

Mark Cusson, a third-shift nurse who Shehadi's attorney's office called "the ringleader of the abuse," was found guilty by a jury in 2019 on multiple

charges of intentional cruelty to persons and disorderly conduct in March 2017, according to court records.

Cusson, of Southington, was captured on video repeatedly kicking Shehadi, who was 62 at the time, straddling him and placing his groin and butt in Shehadi's face and repeatedly entering Shehadi's room and pacing around his bed, pretending to lunge toward him, according to police records. Cusson is currently serving a five-year sentence at the MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution in Suffield, according to the state Department of Correction.

Albert Shehadi said in a statement released Thursday that the individuals responsible for abusing his brother were held accountable for their crimes and this week's settlement "holds the state accountable for the incredible level of systemic failure that allowed the abuse to occur."

"It is hard to comprehend the level of systemic failure that allowed someone so incapacitated to be so brutally abused so openly for so long," he said.

During an emotional testimony before a legislative committee in 2017, Albert Shehadi said watching the videos of the abuse was a painful experience and described the scale of the abuse as incomprehensible.

Warrants that were issued for other employees alleged abuse like forcing William Shehadi to wear a dirty diaper on his head and wrapping a sheet around his head and over his face, records show.

Albert Shehadi said he hopes the outcome of his brother's case sends a message to state leaders about the need "to dramatically improve the treatment of severely mentally ill individuals who are in the care of our State."

In the settlement, the state also agreed to waive a more than \$8 million bill owed by William Shehadi for his more than 30 years in custody and the State agreed to certain other terms, like 24/7 video monitoring for the rest of his stay at the hospital.

"This was a very difficult case, and the state and the parties can move forward now that it has been resolved," Connecticut Attorney General William Tong said in a statement on Thursday.

William Shehadi was committed to the hospital in 1995 after being found not guilty by reason of insanity in the killing of his father in Greenwich. His

court-ordered commitment to Whiting Forensic ended in 2005. His confinement, however, has been extended because of his mental illness, including delusions, compulsiveness and a range of autism-like symptoms.

Another lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court against the nurses and treatment specialists who carried out the abuse, which claims assault, battery and the infliction of emotional distress, was also settled for an undisclosed amount, according to the statement from Shehadi's law firm.

Disability Rights Connecticut, the state's designated advocate for people with disabilities, began its own investigation of Connecticut Valley Hospital and the Whiting Forensic Division in 2017 in the wake of Shehadi's abuse scandal. The group found that some of the dismissed employees have won their jobs back through arbitration.

Disability Rights Connecticut found that Whiting staff operate with an over-reliance on restraining patients and recommended more individualized care than standard hospital-wide practices for patients with a wide variety of needs.

In an attempt at reform, Whiting became a separate hospital with new managers on the CVH grounds. The hospital has 91 high-security beds.

Earlier this year, a state task force recommended sweeping changes to Whiting's practices, including replacing the hospital with a more up-to-date facility. The task force reported that they toured the building and interviewed patients, staff and advocates who all indicated the building was "in poor condition" with numerous safety issues like vermin, lice, limited natural light and broken equipment.

"There was unanimous agreement that these aspects of the maximum-security facility are, in part, a reason for hopelessness on the part of patients and low morale on the part of staff," the report said.

Ponvert said he hopes the case sets a precedent.

"Let this case be an example to all mental health workers in Connecticut and across the nation," Ponvert said. "Our laws and our nation's Constitution protect ill and vulnerable people, people in custody, the weakest among us. Violate your sacred duty toward your fellow human beings, and you will go to jail. You will forever be known as a sadistic monster."