

Hospice cleared for woman's treatment

By Jerry Schwartz
The Associated Press

A government agency has found a clerical error — but no serious wrongdoing — in the case of a hospice that reported a woman dead when she was very much alive.

Martha Lawler of Indianapolis spent the last 10 months of her life in limbo, trying to keep her Social Security and Medicare benefits coming after she was reported dead on April 13, 1998, the same day she fired Odyssey HealthCare as her hospice provider.

An 83-year-old widow who suffered from emphysema, Lawler died on Feb. 19 of this year — but not before she complained to the office of U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind.

Her story was reported nationally by The Associated Press.

In a report released by Lugar on Thursday, the Office of Financial Management of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that Odyssey did falsely report Lawler's death, but said this was merely "a clerical data entry error."

The agency said it could not substantiate charges that Odyssey's representative was verbally abusive.

Lawler had been in and out of hospitals since 1992, when she was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Last year, her doctor told the family she should be kept at home and made

comfortable. She recommended that Odyssey be engaged to manage her care.

Odyssey case manager Debi Vaughn met with Lawler on two occasions. According to Lawler's daughter, Jane Joyal, the case manager told Lawler that she would have to change her oxygen supplier and get a new hospital bed.

Lawler said she did not want to do it, and did not want Odyssey's care. According to Joyal, Vaughn begged the family to reconsider, and finally, when she was asked to leave, she said, "You know, Mrs. Lawler, you will be sorry.... You do need our services."

The Office of Financial Management investigators "were unable to substantiate the allegation of verbal abuse," wrote Penny Thompson, director of the office's Program Integrity Group.

"These results do not mean that the allegation made by Lawler was untrue. As you can imagine, determining what transpired in a conversation between two individuals in a private home is difficult."

But an examination of Vaughn's file turned up no complaints and several letters of gratitude from families. In telephone interviews, one patient and four families had only compliments for Vaughn's work.

As for the data entry mistake, the agency said Odyssey had changed its computer process to ensure that the error would not be made again.

Pastor in Sacramento killed in home robbery

MATHER, Calif. — A suburban Sacramento pastor described as a "champion of the underdog and the downtrodden" was stabbed to death in his home in an apparent robbery.

The Rev. Edward R. Sheriff, 68, created a food pantry, a crisis hot line for gays and lesbians and sent boxcars of medical supplies and clothing to troubled countries.

Sheriff, an associate pastor at the Cathedral of Promise Metropolitan Community Church, was found murdered Wednesday evening, police spokesman Glenn Graves said.

Investigators believe Sheriff was murdered in a robbery, Graves said. Neighbors called police after seeing two men driving Sheriff's cars away.

Officers found Sheriff with multiple stab wounds to his upper torso, Graves said. Police were looking for two men seen driving Sheriff's vehicles, a 1992 White GMC Sonoma truck and a 1998 Green Lincoln Town Car.

"We have no indication a hate crime is involved," he said.

Marghe Covino, spokeswoman for the Lambda Community Center, a local gay advocacy group, said Sheriff was an advocate for the gay community and a "champion of the underdog and the downtrodden."

Covino said she recently did a television interview with Sheriff, who was gay, in which he talked about the difficulty he had as a Christian fundamentalist coming to terms with his sexuality.

Sheriff said he "had come to a living and loving relationship with the Lord and that he was glad to help other people who were having problems and were being told they were evil and creatures of the devil," Covino said.

Sheriff, known to his congregants as "Reverend Ed," founded and ran the Samaritan Center food pantry, selling boxes of food to the poor for low prices. He also operated Out of the Closet, a thrift store that helped support the food pantry.

"He was the most giving man I've ever met. He didn't care who you were or what you did, he just wanted to help," said the Rev. Terri Miller, a friend and former coworker of Sheriff's.

Sheriff, with his white beard and jovial nature, made a perfect Santa Claus at the church's Christmas parties, she said.

"It fit him well because he was such a giver," Miller said.

Penny Wilson, a friend of Sheriff's, went to the Samaritan Center in Sacramento's Oak Park neighborhood to help Thursday.

"I'm going to work in the thrift store and we're going to continue to give out food boxes. He would have wanted it that way," Wilson said.

"This was his legacy and we're not going to let it die," Wilson said.

Sheriff's survivors include his former wife and their two children, the University Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches said in a written statement released by its West Hollywood headquarters.

The Associated Press

Calendar

Friday, Oct. 22

The Hillel Jewish Student Center will offer a learning version of its weekly Shabbat services and

dinner intended for people unfamiliar with Shabbat customs.

The free service and dinner will be at 6:30 p.m. at Hillel at 1059 Hilyard St. For more information, call the center at 343-8920.

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