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Suit Is Settled In Inmate Death, Lawyers Say

By ELISSA GOOTMAN

Lawyers for Nassau County agreed today to pay \$7.75 million to relatives of an inmate who was beaten to death by guards in the county jail, lawyers for the inmate's family said, settling a federal civil rights lawsuit.

The settlement, which still requires approval from the Nassau Legislature, comes a little more than four years after Thomas Pizzuto, 38, a heroin addict serving a 90-day jail sentence for traffic violations, was assaulted by correction officers who, investigators said, were perturbed that he was clamoring for his methadone treatment.

Mr. Pizzuto's killing, coupled with several other high-profile cases of brutality that came to light around the same time, focused intense scrutiny on the jail, in East Meadow. The United States Department of Justice initiated its own investigation and lawsuit after Mr. Pizzuto's death, uncovering widespread problems that the county has since agreed to address.

Peter J. Neufeld, a lawyer with the firm of Cochran, Neufeld & Scheck, which along with other lawyers represented Mr. Pizzuto's widow and son, said he believed that the award was among the largest Nassau has agreed to pay in a case with a single victim. He said that Mr. Pizzuto's widow, Virginia, was "very pleased" with the amount, and that he hoped the sum would serve as a warning.

"This huge settlement will inspire Nassau County to make sure that procedures are in place to reduce the risk of this kind of thing happening again," Mr. Neufeld said, "because they simply as a financial matter can't afford it."

Jeffrey S. Lisabeth, an East Meadow lawyer, said he believed that the county Legislature was likely to approve the settlement, particularly given that Mr. Pizzuto died under a previous administration's watch.

"This is part of a mess that had been left to the current administration, which they're attempting piece by piece to remedy," Mr. Lisabeth said. "I would expect approval."

About a year ago, the Justice Department announced that in order to stave off a department lawsuit, the county had agreed to adopt new policies to improve inmates' medical care and limit the use of force by correction officers. Conditions at the jail are still being monitored to ensure compliance with those guidelines.

The authorities have cited significant improvements.

