

August 25, 2010

Plant City sued over 911 call in woman's death

By Dan Sullivan, Times Staff Writer

The suit alleges response to a 911 call from a car trunk was bungled.

TAMPA - The city of Plant City faces a lawsuit in the 2008 death of a Tampa woman who called 911 from inside a car trunk before she was killed.

The woman, Jennifer Johnson, 31, was kidnapped Nov. 15, 2008. She spoke with a Plant City 911 operator via a cell phone. Johnson told the operator that she was inside the trunk of her car and didn't know where she was. The call dropped after a minute and 20 seconds.

The lawsuit, filed Aug. 19 in Hillsborough Circuit Court, alleges that the operator assured Johnson during the call that the operator would find out Johnson's location, but failed to do so.

Johnson was later found dead inside an abandoned house in Lakeland.

"We think it was a tragic situation that could have been avoided," said Sumeet Kaul, an attorney representing Johnson's estate. "We believe there were procedures that were not properly followed by 911, and we intend to prove that."

Attorney Jim Hines Jr. is named as the plaintiff in the suit, acting as the personal representative of Johnson's estate.

The complaint alleges that during the call the 911 operator said, "Where are you ... calm down and I will find out where you are."

In making that statement, the operator made "an express promise or assurance of assistance," according to the lawsuit. The operator's failure to locate Johnson resulted in Johnson's death, the lawsuit said.

Tom Scarritt, an attorney for Plant City in the case, said that the operator was trying to get Johnson to calm down during the call in order that she could provide information about her location.

"(Johnson) was understandably very upset, and it was hard to understand what she was saying," Scarritt said. "The problem was not that the 911 operators were not responding appropriately. It was that she couldn't give them enough information to help her."

It is questionable whether the situation would have been made worse if the operator had tried to call Johnson back, possibly alerting the kidnapper to her attempt to get help, Scarritt said.

He added that he is still investigating an earlier call Johnson made from inside the trunk when she was closer to Tampa.

The Plant City operator, Amanda Hill, was later fired. Three other Plant City operators resigned over the incident.

Plant City police later said that Hill notified two supervisors about the dropped call, but neither listened to the tape of the call, and no officers were dispatched.

Johnson's ex-boyfriend, Vincent Brown, 40, is awaiting trial on murder and kidnapping charges in her death. Brown is the father of Johnson's now 3-year-old daughter, Je'Nelyce Brown.

Dan Sullivan can be reached at (813) 226-3321 or dsullivan@sptimes.com.

St. Petersburg Times



2010 St. Petersburg Times. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.
You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing http://license.icopyright.net/3.861870x_1117430
into any web browser. St. Petersburg Times and St. Petersburg Times logos are registered trademarks of St. Petersburg Times. The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.