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Pepper-Sprayed Inmates Reach \$177K Settlement

NEW ORLEANS — A private prison in northeast Louisiana must pay a total of \$177,500 to five former inmates of that prison whose faces were pepper-sprayed while they were handcuffed and kneeling in 2016. One inmate's father said he believed each man was getting about \$20,000. "I told my son I'd give him 20 grand to not sign that ... and let the truth come out," Larry Vinet said Thursday from Charleston, West Virginia. Overall settlement terms, previously confidential, were made public Thursday under a public records request made to the court on Tuesday by The Associated Press. LaSalle Management LLC holds both state inmates and immigrants detained for ICE in Richwood Correctional Center, where an immigrant killed himself in October. That suicide could have been prevented, an Associated Press investigation found. LaSalle also holds immigrants in other prisons. LaSalle is not admitting liability in the settlement with Adley T. Campbell, Darin Whittington, Sidney Stephens, Jareth Vinet and Jimmy Klobas, Magistrate Judge Karen Hayes wrote in minutes made public Thursday morning. All five were inmates at Richwood when they sued LaSalle and six guards in October 2017. Three are now at other prisons and two have been released. The \$177,500 is to be paid as a lump sum, Hayes wrote. Her minutes did not state how much each inmate will receive. "As non-binding additional terms of the settlement, defendants agreed to facilitate the transfer of one of the plaintiffs to a non-LaSalle Management facility, and to assist in reviewing the record of a second plaintiff to make sure that his Good Time credits were not affected by the incident giving rise to the lawsuit," she wrote, noting that lawyers for the five men said those terms have been met. She wrote that attorneys on both sides agreed that "neither they nor their clients will publicly comment further on the lawsuit or the settlement." "I don't agree with that. I can tell you that right now," Larry Vinet said. David J. Utter of Savannah, Georgia, who was among lawyers for the five men, had said on Monday, "I'm only allowed to say that the case has been settled amicably." Jennifer McKay, an attorney for LaSalle, did not respond to a call and email Monday requesting comment or respond to the AP's public records request to her on Tuesday. The Louisiana Supreme Court ruled in 2017 that private agencies which are performing public work are subject to the state's public records law. The lawsuit alleged that in 2016, the five inmates were pulled out of a dormitory, strip-searched and asked about tattoos. After they put their clothes back on they were handcuffed and escorted to an area called the "White House," where they were accused of being members of a gang and made to kneel and sprayed with "mace," according to the suit. The lawsuit alleged negligence, unreasonable search and seizure, intentional infliction of emotional distress, excessive force, conspiracy, conspiracy with racial animus, supervisory liability and negligent hiring, training, retention and/or entrustment. A federal indictment in March 2018 charged five former Richwood Correctional Center guards with conspiring to assault inmates and filing false reports about the incident. All five pleaded guilty to conspiracy during 2018 and 2019, saying they filed false reports to cover up why the inmates needed medical care. One pleaded guilty to plotting to violate the inmates' civil rights and the others to conspiring to cover up wrongdoing. Four signed statements saying they had sprayed pepper spray into the faces of kneeling, handcuffed inmates; the fifth said he stood by during the spraying. Charges against one of four who used the spray were dropped after his death in an unrelated shooting. The guards got sentences ranging from 15 months to five years. The most detailed statement about the incident was made by former Capt. Roderick Douglas, who pleaded guilty to plotting to violate inmates' civil rights and admitted pepper-spraying two inmates' eyes, then passing the can to other guards.