

\$160K for stun-gunning at mental center

Henry K. Lee

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Alameda County has agreed to pay \$160,000 to settle a federal civil rights lawsuit filed by an 18-year-old developmentally disabled woman who accused sheriff's deputies of using excessive force when they tackled her and shocked her with a stun gun at a Castro Valley mental health center.

Sapreena Fowler, who has the mental capacity of a 4-year-old, said she was forcibly restrained during a confrontation Feb. 8, 2011, at Redwood Place, an inpatient mental health rehabilitation center at 18949 Redwood Road.

Fowler, an Oakland resident, spent two nights at Santa Rita Jail in Dublin and was charged with resisting an officer and battery against a law-enforcement officer. The charges were eventually dropped.

The settlement money will be placed in a special trust for Fowler, said her attorney Julia Sherwin.

As part of the settlement, the sheriff's office has amended its protocol for deputies responding to the center, reminding them to speak quietly to those who are mentally ill or developmentally disabled and to "give them time to calm down," Sherwin said.

The deputies who confronted Fowler "inserted themselves into the situation," Sherwin said.

Sheriff Greg Ahern has said the deputies "acted in compliance with proper procedures and policies" to restrain Fowler and "protect others from being hurt."

In their reports, Deputies Misty Johnson and Rosario Robson wrote that they had spotted an agitated Fowler "being aggressive and combative with staff members." She spat on them and tried to fight them, the deputies wrote.

Robson used her stun gun twice to shock Fowler.

"Deputies Robson and Johnson ignored their training and abused this vulnerable young woman when she most needed help," Sherwin said.

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