

Inside the \$23.6 Million Verdict Against PruittHealth, How a Georgia Family Got a Jury to Believe Them

By [All About Lawyer](#) September 11, 2026 Reading Time: 6 minutes

John D. Owens Jr. spent decades getting kids into sports, 4-H, ROTC, and cheerleading around Fitzgerald, Georgia. He coached baseball and basketball at Fitzgerald High School, coached in two neighboring counties, and scouted for the Pittsburgh Pirates. In March 2021, he died at 76 inside a PruittHealth nursing home. Five years, one lawsuit, and a two-week trial later, a Gwinnett County jury decided his death wasn't just a tragedy — it was something PruittHealth caused, and on August 21, 2026, they ordered the company to pay his family \$23.6 million.

A Comeback, Then a Decline

Owens first moved into PruittHealth-Fitzgerald in early 2020, in the middle of COVID-era visitor restrictions. According to his son Matthew, he actually improved there — well enough that by September 2020, he'd transferred to an assisted living facility in Abbeville, walking with a walker and largely caring for himself.

That progress didn't last. After a urological surgery led to infections, Owens' health declined again, and he was moved back into skilled nursing care at PruittHealth-Fitzgerald. That's when, according to his family, everything changed.

The Medications Nobody Could Explain

While back at PruittHealth-Fitzgerald, Owens tested positive twice for morphine, lorazepam, and hydrocodone — none of which had been prescribed to him. In January 2021, Matthew Owens says he got a call that his father had experienced a significant change in condition. It was only later, talking to his father's physician and a nurse, that he learned drug testing had turned up medications nobody could account for. On January 27, 2021, Owens was taken to the hospital. He died weeks later, on March 11, 2021.

The family's lawsuit, filed in June 2022, alleged that staff had used the three drugs as a chemical restraint — not to treat Owens medically, but to keep him manageable. At trial, the family's attorneys argued the nurses likely weren't trying to hurt him; they were overwhelmed and used the medications to control his behavior while managing other

residents. According to the lawsuit, only nurses at the facility had access to the controlled substances that turned up in his system.

The Understaffing Argument

Central to the case was a staffing claim: the family alleged that on the night in question, two nurses were responsible for 46 residents on the overnight shift. Their attorneys argued that kind of ratio is exactly the condition that leads facilities to sedate residents rather than individually manage their care. PruittHealth disputed that the facility was understaffed at all.

A Fired Whistleblower and Missing Video

Two more pieces of evidence shaped the trial. First, the family alleged that the facility's own medical director at the time, Dr. Eugene Jackson, had flagged the drug test results and tried to get them added to Owens' chart — and was terminated after the facility's administrator refused. Jackson became one of the family's central witnesses at trial, testifying about what he says he tried to raise internally.

Second, the lawsuit raised questions about surveillance footage from the night the medications were allegedly administered — footage the family argued should have been preserved and wasn't. Losing evidence a company should reasonably know is relevant to a [legal](#) claim is the kind of thing juries are typically told they're allowed to hold against a defendant, and the family's attorneys leaned on it at trial.

Legal

PruittHealth disputed nearly all of it. The company argued Owens received an appropriate level of care, denied giving him medication to control his behavior, and maintained throughout the case that he died from pneumonia and related medical complications — not from anything staff did.

What the Jury Actually Decided

After a two-week trial in Gwinnett County State Court, the jury found PruittHealth and related entities liable, including for violations of Georgia's Bill of Rights for Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities. The award broke down into two pieces: \$12.6 million to Owens' estate for his own pain and suffering, and \$11 million to his surviving family for what Georgia law calls "the full value of his life" — a wrongful death measure that isn't about proving lost wages, but the value of the life itself.

A few days later, on August 24, 2026, the jury went a step further. It found that the nurses at PruittHealth-Fitzgerald were also legally acting as agents of two other companies in the corporate structure — PruittHealth Inc. and United Health Services of Georgia Inc. — which let the family collect the judgment against all three entities, not just the local facility. That finding relied on two legal doctrines: agency, which can make a parent or affiliated company responsible for another entity’s actions when the relationship meets certain legal tests, and piercing the corporate veil, which lets a court look past a company’s separate legal identity when the corporate structure is being used to avoid accountability.

Ethics

PruittHealth Isn’t Done Fighting

PruittHealth, headquartered in Norcross and serving roughly 26,000 patients across nearly 200 Southeast locations, said publicly it strongly disagrees with the verdict. On September 8, 2026, the company asked the court to set the verdict aside, arguing there are significant legal and evidentiary problems with how the trial went. It says it plans to pursue every available post-trial and appellate option — meaning \$23.6 million is what a jury decided, not necessarily what PruittHealth will ultimately pay. The company also said it remains committed to quality care and expressed sympathy for the Owens family, while continuing to deny it did anything wrong.

Why This Case Matters Beyond Fitzgerald

Evan Jones, one of the family’s attorneys, has handled other cases against PruittHealth facilities in Valdosta, Albany, and elsewhere in Georgia, and says chronic understaffing has come up repeatedly in that litigation. Proving it, he says, means digging into staffing records and talking to former employees — exactly the kind of case-building that turned a family’s search for answers into a five-year legal fight. For Matthew Owens, the money was never really the point. He says the family only went to court because PruittHealth never gave them one.

What Comes Next

The Owens family’s case is a verdict, not a final judgment — PruittHealth’s post-trial motion and any appeal could take months or longer to resolve, and appellate courts do sometimes reduce or overturn large jury awards. There’s no claim process here for other families to join; this was an individual wrongful death case, not a class action. Families with a loved one in a PruittHealth facility, or any nursing home, who have concerns about

unexplained medication changes or unaccounted-for injuries can request their loved one's medication administration records and incident reports directly from the facility, and consult a nursing home negligence attorney if something doesn't add up.

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Researched and written by Israr Ahmad, [legal](#) content researcher and founder of AllAboutLawyer.com. Facts verified against news coverage of the trial and verdict, and the family's trial counsel, on September 11, 2026. Last Updated: September 11, 2026.

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