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PruittHealth hit with \$23M verdict in Georgia nursing home death

The metro Atlanta company denies wrongdoing and says it is pursuing legal options.



PruittHealth, headquartered in Norcross, says it is pursuing legal options after being hit with a \$23.6 million jury verdict in a case alleging its staff caused the death of a Georgia nursing home patient. (Jason Getz/AJC)

By [Rosie Manins](#)

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Georgia healthcare provider PruittHealth has been hit with a \$23.6 million jury verdict in a lawsuit alleging its nursing home staff gave unprescribed medication to a retired high school teacher and coach, leading to his death.

The Norcross-headquartered company, which serves around 26,000 patients at almost 200 locations throughout the Southeast, said it strongly disagrees with the verdict and does not believe it is supported by the evidence presented at trial last month in Gwinnett County.

“We believe there are significant legal and evidentiary issues that warrant further review, and we intend to pursue all available post-trial and appellate options,” the company told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in a statement Monday.

The jurors heard two weeks of evidence before deciding Aug. 21 that PruittHealth was negligent in a way that caused the fatal injuries of John Owens Jr. at its nursing home in Fitzgerald in March 2021.

PruittHealth violated Georgia’s bill of rights for residents of long-term care facilities, the jurors found, awarding damages to Owens’ two sons, Matthew Owens and John Owens III. The verdict form shows \$12.6 million was awarded for the father’s pain and suffering and \$11 million for the value of his life.

Matthew Owens told the AJC the verdict is gratifying but brings “no joy” to what has been a difficult ordeal. He said he and his brother wanted answers and accountability from PruittHealth and to prevent another family from suffering in the same way.

“This has been about transparency and having an accounting,” he said Wednesday. “I’m very gratified that the jury reached the conclusion it did. But the whole thing is such mixed emotions.”

John Owens Jr. was an economics teacher and baseball and basketball coach at Fitzgerald High School, near where he grew up in Abbeville. He also coached baseball and basketball in Wilcox and Dodge counties in south-central Georgia and scouted for the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team.

He was 76 when he died on March 11, 2021, about six weeks after his sons say nursing home staff gave him unprescribed morphine, lorazepam and hydrocodone to curb his difficult behavior stemming from a past brain injury.

The sons said their father had a history of problematic behavior tied to his diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder and that he suffered anxiety, agitation and confusion. They alleged the drugs that “chemically restrained” their father also caused his rapid decline in health and ultimately his death.

PruittHealth denies any wrongdoing or liability but said it respects the judicial process and appreciates the jury's time and service.

"We extend our deepest sympathies to the Owens family and recognize the profound loss they have experienced," the company said. "We are committed to providing quality care and support to the patients, residents and families who rely on us every day."

In their complaint, the sons said their father was first admitted to the nursing home in January 2020. They said he was briefly moved to a nearby assisted living facility that November and then spent several weeks in Tift Regional Medical Center before returning to the nursing home Dec. 16, 2020.

The sons alleged their father's health significantly deteriorated after he was given the unprescribed medication during an overnight shift at the nursing home between Jan. 26 and Jan. 27, 2021. They said the facility was chronically understaffed, with two nurses caring for 46 residents that night, and their father was likely sedated so the nurses could attend to others.

On Jan. 27, 2021, the retired teacher and coach was temporarily hospitalized and drug tested, revealing the unprescribed medication, case records show.

His sons alleged the nursing home administrator and other PruittHealth leaders failed to notify authorities and the family about the drugs or otherwise properly address the situation. They said key surveillance footage from that night was deleted and the nursing home's medical director was fired after repeatedly raising concerns about the unprescribed medication.

In pretrial filings, PruittHealth denied the allegations, saying John Owens Jr. received the standard level of care and died from pneumonia and associated issues. The company said no one gave him unprescribed medication to control his behavior and that the nursing home was adequately staffed.

Matthew Owens said his father had a fantastic life, which he dedicated to helping people.

"He was an incredible man," he said.

About the Author



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