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SGA Family speaks after jury awards \$23.6M in PruittHealth nursing home lawsuit

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By Ashanti Drake





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FITZGERALD, Ga. (WALB) — A Georgia jury has awarded \$23.6 million to the family of longtime Fitzgerald teacher and coach John D. Owens Jr., who died in March 2021 after spending his final months at PruittHealth-Fitzgerald.

After a two-week trial in Gwinnett County State Court, jurors found PruittHealth and related entities liable and found violations of Georgia's Bill of Rights for Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities.

The jury awarded \$12.6 million to Owens' estate for his pain and suffering and \$11 million to his surviving family for the full value of his life.

But Matthew Owens, son of John Owens Jr., says the family never set out seeking a multimillion-dollar verdict.

"It really wasn't. Like, really, what this has been about the whole time. It didn't have to go this route. It ended up this way because this was the only route."

Who was John Owens?

Owens was 76 when he died on March 11, 2021.

He was a longtime teacher and baseball and basketball coach at Fitzgerald High School. He also coached in Wilcox and Dodge counties and scouted for the Pittsburgh Pirates.





Members of the Fitzgerald Baseball Team visits Coach John Owens during his stay at a nursing home (Fitzgerald Diamond Club)

"He was a great man, a great dad, a great person," Matthew Owens said.

Matthew says his father spent his life helping young people and encouraging them to get involved whether that meant sports, 4-H, cheerleading, ROTC or another activity.

"He loved to help kids. And he did."



Members of the Fitzgerald Baseball Team visits Coach John Owens during his stay at a nursing home (Fitzgerald Diamond Club)

A recovery before returning to PruittHealth

Matthew Owens says his father first entered PruittHealth-Fitzgerald in early 2020.

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on visitors, Owens eventually

He left PruittHealth in September 2020 and moved to an assisted living facility in Abbeville.

Matthew remembers his father walking with a walker and becoming largely self-sufficient.

“He was walking. He was using a walker at that time, but he was getting all around the facility. And, you know, he was largely self-sufficient.”

After a urological surgery and subsequent infections, however, Owens’ health declined and he eventually returned to skilled nursing care at PruittHealth-Fitzgerald.

That’s when his family says something changed.

The medications

According to the lawsuit and evidence presented during the trial, Owens tested positive for morphine, lorazepam and hydrocodone — medications his family says had not been prescribed to him.

The plaintiffs alleged the medications were administered as a form of chemical restraint to control Owens’ behavior.

Matthew Owens says he was notified in January 2021 that his father had experienced a significant change in condition.



Coach John Owens during his stay at a nursing home (Matt Owens)

He later learned from his father-in-law, who said he was that the nursing home had no record of the

"There were medicines that hadn't been prescribed, and some scary ones."

Owens was taken to the hospital on Jan. 27, 2021.

The family says they expected PruittHealth to investigate and explain what happened.

"I expected I would hear something from the facility. It'd be, you know, there'd be work done. I had to really understand what was happening, and it just never, never happened."

According to Evan Jones, the attorney who represented the Owens family, that search for answers was what initially brought the family to him.

Jones says the family was not initially looking to file a lawsuit.

"They really were not keen on filing a lawsuit," Jones told WALB. "They were keen on, so what happened to my father?"

Jones says the family tried to work with PruittHealth to find answers but ultimately filed suit.

What the lawsuit alleged

The Owens family alleged that PruittHealth was understaffed on the night their father received the medications.

They argued that two nurses were responsible for 46 residents during the overnight shift and that staffing conditions contributed to the decision to medicate Owens.

Jones says evidence presented at trial showed the nurses did not necessarily intend to harm Owens.





Coach John Owens (Matt Owens)

Instead, he argued they used the medications to control his behavior while trying to care for other residents.

"They chemically restrained him with these three medications to his detriment."

The family further alleged that PruittHealth's former medical director, Dr. Eugene Jackson, raised concerns about the medications and was later terminated.

Those allegations were disputed by PruittHealth.

The former medical director

Jones says Jackson became one of the family's key witnesses at trial.

Jones says Jackson had access to information about the drug tests and tried to bring the issue to the attention of the facility's administrator.

"She refused to even put these lab results on Coach Owens' chart, and he was ultimately terminated."

PruittHealth has denied wrongdoing and liability.

PruittHealth's response

During the case, PruittHealth argued that Owens received the appropriate level of care and denied that he was given unprescribed medications to control his behavior.

The company also disputed allegations that the facility was understaffed.

PruittHealth maintained that Owens died from pneumonia and related medical issues.

Following the verdict, PruittHealth said it strongly disagrees with the jury's decision and believes there are significant legal and evidentiary issues that warrant further review.

The company said it intends to pursue available post-trial and appellate options.

PruittHealth also expressed sympathy to the Owens family and said it remains committed to providing quality care to residents and their families.



Lawyer says the problem goes beyond Fitzgerald

Evan Jones told WALB he has handled other cases involving PruittHealth facilities in Fitzgerald, Valdosta, Albany and elsewhere in Georgia.

He says understaffing is an issue he has encountered in nursing-home litigation.

"It would not surprise me in some of my cases we have found, yes, they are chronically understaffed."

Jones said proving understaffing requires examining staffing records and speaking with former employees.

He says the goal is not to shut down PruittHealth.

"We just want, really, Pruitt to be better at how they do business."

For Jones, that starts with accountability.

"Accountability is where it first starts with a nursing home or a corporation with doing things differently, you know, doing things the right way, putting proper staffing in place."

The family says the process was difficult

For Matthew Owens, sitting through the trial meant reliving some of the most difficult moments of his father's life.

He says that's especially painful because his father had such a long history of helping others.

"The hardest part, when anybody goes through this, is you end up stuck on this worst part of his life."

Owens says hearing testimony from nurses, the former medical director and others was heartbreaking.



And he says even after the verdict, PruittHealth has never acknowledged that anything happened to his father.

"As we sit here today, no one has ever acknowledged, I mean, of course, we had an impartial jury, you know, make a decision. But in terms of Pruitt, they've never acknowledged it."

He says that's frustrating.

Still, Owens says the family is grateful they had the opportunity to present their case to a jury.

A case that took years to reach trial

The Owens family filed the lawsuit in June 2022.

The complaint named PruittHealth-Fitzgerald LLC and several other PruittHealth-related companies, along with individual nurses and employees.

The family brought claims including professional negligence, ordinary negligence, medical battery, attorneys' fees and punitive damages.

A June 2026 court filing shows the trial was scheduled to begin Aug. 10 and was expected to last two to three weeks.

The jury returned its verdict Aug. 21, 2026.

The judgment was entered against PruittHealth-Fitzgerald LLC, PruittHealth Inc. and United Health Services of Georgia Inc., along with court costs and interest, according to the attorneys who represented the Owens family.

What's next?

PruittHealth has indicated it plans to pursue post-trial and appellate options, meaning the legal fight may not be over.

But the Owens family says their focus remains on what can be learned from their father's death.

Matthew Owens says families with loved ones in nursing homes have a right to know what is



"Your greatest fear, when you have someone in these facilities, is what you can't see."

He says he hopes other families never have to experience what his family went through.

"None of it I'd trade anything for it to have never happened."

WALB has asked PruittHealth what, if any, changes the company is making following the verdict, including changes to staffing, medication administration, behavioral care and oversight.

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