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Family Members Sue Fairfax Funeral Home

By Josh White
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The four grandchildren of a retired Army colonel whose body was left in a Virginia funeral home's unrefrigerated garage filed a lawsuit in Fairfax County yesterday, alleging that the funeral home and its parent company inappropriately handled the body.

Marian Savage of Springfield and her three siblings filed separate complaints against Houston-based Service Corporation International and its local affiliates, arguing that Col. Andrew DeGraff's body was allowed to decompose on a storage rack in the garage of National Funeral Home in Falls Church last year. DeGraff was buried Jan. 2 at Arlington National Cemetery, and his family had no idea how his body had been stored since his Oct. 12 death.

The lawsuit alleges that the funeral conglomerate "willfully, intentionally, recklessly and negligently defiled, degraded, humiliated and debased the body of Colonel DeGraff" by failing to refrigerate his remains and by failing to treat his body with dignity and respect. The suit also alleges fraud and violation of the Consumer Protection Act. Taken together, the four lawsuits seek damages of \$60 million.

DeGraff's was one of several bodies destined for Arlington that allegedly were stored on the unrefrigerated garage racks at National Funeral Home -- an SCI regional clearinghouse for embalming and body preparation -- according to current and former employees. The Washington Post has reported that as many as 200 bodies were stored in the garage over several months last year because refrigeration units were full. Some were balanced on biohazard boxes and on gurneys as they leaked fluids on the floor, the employees said.

"I am deeply saddened by the treatment my grandfather received," Savage said yesterday, speaking for her family. "As a three-war veteran who served his country dutifully, he deserved in death what he provided in life. Our goal through this lawsuit is to change the way the defendants do business and to make sure that this doesn't ever happen again."

Lisa Marshall, an SCI spokeswoman, said that an internal investigation is underway and that if the company finds any wrongdoing, it will take corrective action.

"Our sincerest condolences go out to family members of Army Col. Andrew DeGraff for their loss," Marshall said. "We're sad that the recent allegations have further contributed to their loss. We're committed to treating all human remains -- as well as the families and loved ones of the deceased -- with dignity and respect. We understand their distress causing them to seek recourse in the courts. All of us want to know the facts behind what happened, and we're diligently conducting an investigation."

Steven Napper, a former embalmer at the Falls Church facility, documented the conditions in photographs and complained to company and state officials before resigning in February. He is cooperating with a Virginia state board investigation. The family of retired Army Maj. Richard Morgan, whose body also was left on the storage rack, has asked Fairfax County prosecutor to investigate the case as a crime.

"I think that their responsibility, their liability, is clear in this case," said Kim Brooks-Rodney of the D.C.-based law firm Cohen & Cohen, which represents DeGraff's family. "It's going to be extremely difficult to deny that Colonel DeGraff's body was defiled when photographs exist of him in his coffin in a garage, decaying and rotting."

The Morgan and DeGraff families said



Marian Savage, left, daughter Sophia, 4, and sister Grace Wozniak visit the grave of retired Army Col. Andrew DeGraff at Arlington Cemetery early this month.

SCI officials have offered to refund the cost of funeral services; other families said they have contacted five area funeral homes owned by SCI to check on the status of their loved ones' bodies. Current employees said SCI has hired a team of lawyers to conduct an independent probe.

SCI employee Robert Ranghelli, 19, of Manassas Park was placed on paid administrative leave Friday, days after he spoke to The Post, and on radio and television, about conditions at National Funeral Home, according to Ranghelli and his lawyer. Ranghelli bolstered Napper's allegations and those of a customer and other employees.

Another former SCI contract driver has come forward, saying that he visited the central care facility at National at least 100 times over the past 18 months and regularly had to leave bodies in the hallways, a back dressing room and the garage.

"It was disgusting, unethical, unhealthy and despicable," said Shaun Reid, 23, of Stafford, who was recently fired by the SCI contractor because he was caught speeding while on the job. Reid said he almost always saw bodies in the garage. "That was normal. This is not made-up. I saw these things."