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Veteran's family sues funeral home, claims neglect

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The family of an Army veteran has sued a Virginia funeral home, claiming the firm mishandled the man's body by leaving it in an unrefrigerated garage for more than two months as it awaited burial at Arlington National Cemetery.

The lawsuits filed against National Funeral Home and its parent company, Houston-based Service Corp. International, seek \$60 million in damages.

The family of retired Army Col. Andrew DeGraff claims in the lawsuits filed Tuesday that the body was "defiled, degraded, humiliated and debased" as it sat in storage last fall.

"The treatment Colonel DeGraff's body suffered was not fitting for anyone," lawyer Kim Brooks-Rodney wrote.

The four lawsuits — separately filed on behalf of four of DeGraff's grandchildren — came after The Washington Post reported that as many as 200 bodies were stored in the garage.

One of DeGraff's grandchildren, Marian Savage of Springfield, said he was a veteran of three wars "who served his country dutifully. He deserved in death what he provided in life."

Richard Morgan Jr. of Harrisonburg claims his father's body was left for months to rot in the garage and has asked Fairfax County authorities to start a criminal investigation. Prosecutors have not said whether they are investigating.

Last year, National Funeral Home was placed on probation for three years and ordered to pay a \$13,000 fine after an unannounced inspection found unsanitary conditions and other violations. It was the second time in the past six years that Virginia regulators put the home on probation.

SCI spokeswoman Lisa Marshall said an investigation is under way. If problems are identified, the company plans to "promptly take immediate corrective action," she said.

In December 2003, SCI paid \$100 million to settle a class-action lawsuit filed in Florida by about 700 families that accused company cemeteries of misplacing bodies, losing track of plots and in some cases digging up remains to make room for new graves.