

## Starving for Help: A search for mental healthcare ends tragically at the Putnam County Jail

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Gregory Allan Futch was physically and mentally ill when he was taken into custody by the Putnam County Sheriff's Office.

When the deputies came, Vicki Futch expected them to take her mentally ill son to the hospital.

She'd been in touch with a captain from the Putnam County Sheriff's Office about her son, Gregory Allan Futch, 54, trying to arrange an escort.

But Greg was in a particularly agitated mood that day. He became violent and struck Vicki, 80, across the face.

Feeling as though she were out of options, Vicki Futch texted the captain again, but a deputy responded instead. He noted a mark on Vicki's cheek, arrested Futch, and booked him into the county jail.

Futch did eventually end up at the hospital, two days later. He couldn't stop vomiting, so deputies took him to the emergency room. He didn't stay long.

When the doctor at the Putnam Community Medical Center released Futch, he wrote in a discharge notice that "any significant change in condition or worsening of symptoms should prompt an immediate return" to the emergency room.

The symptoms did worsen, but Futch spent the next two weeks suffering in jail. Medical staff there logged behavioral and physical health episodes with regularity, but were unable or unwilling to provide relief for Futch.

By the time he was taken back to the hospital, Futch, at 5 feet 9 inches tall, weighed 100 pounds. Two days before he was arrested, he weighed 154 pounds, according to medical records.

The Times-Union reviewed hundreds of pages of documents and reports obtained by the Futch family's lawyer, Greg Lauer. The records detailed Futch's stay in jail, his medical treatment and included video footage of him in a medical isolation cell. The documents and an expert witness analysis illuminate a failure by the Putnam County Sheriff's Office to care for a desperately ill man.

Lauer, of Ft. Lauderdale, filed suit in federal court on Thursday, naming the sheriff's private healthcare provider and its employees, including doctors and nurses, as defendants.

"The unconscionable and callous conduct of the defendants, in this case, is indefensible both legally and morally and cannot be tolerated in our civilized society," Lauer wrote in his complaint.

Citing potential litigation, the Sheriff's Office declined to comment on the Futch case.

"It is certainly the goal and responsibility of the Sheriff's Office to provide excellent physical and psychological health care to inmates," Colonel Joseph Wells said.

Management and Training Corporation, a private corrections healthcare provider that contracts with the Sheriff's Office, also declined to comment.

Vicki Futch said she told multiple people at the Sheriff's Office that Greg was mentally ill. Even if he did go to the jail at first, Futch said, she thought he would soon be transferred to a hospital.

If she had been told her son was starving and dehydrated from vomiting so much, Vicki said, she would have driven Greg to the hospital herself.

"We would have done it," Vicki Futch said. "We would have done it in an instant, but we thought he was taken care of. I know that sounds stupid now, because I would never trust them again, but I trusted them."

**ARROWHEADS AND ARTIFACTS**

Born in Pensacola in February 1963 but raised in Putnam County, Greg Futch attended Palatka High School.

Futch loved the outdoors and was fascinated by historical objects. He went diving in the St. Johns river and he scoured Northeast Florida terrain for old bones and arrowheads.

In a side room at the Futch home in Palatka, Greg's living space was virtually unchanged since he left it. Shelves were lined with antique glass containers, small sculptures and artifacts.

Futch had a habit of running into bad luck. He lived in a mobile home until it burnt down several years ago, prompting him to move back in with Vicki. He worked in construction and as a tree surgeon, but then he hurt his shoulder.

Greg Futch started taking pain pills after the shoulder injury. Vicki said he used them only as prescribed by a doctor, but his medical history indicates he was chronically addicted to the pills.

After a mental and physical health episode years ago prompted a trip to the hospital, doctors suggested Futch's use of the pills might have been contributing to his confusion.

Futch had his run-ins with the law. Most of them were in the 1980s, related to drugs or drinking.

But he had managed to stay out of trouble as he got older. Before the episode that took him to Putnam County jail for the final time, he had not been arrested since violating his probation in 2007.

Vicki Futch said Greg didn't get out much, but she could rely on him. As his mother was getting older and needed more help, Greg did more work around the house: taking care of the dogs and running errands, for instance. He told Vicki she would never have to worry, because he would always be there.

Even when Greg Futch was hearing voices, Vicki said, he was usually able to snap out of it if she asked him for something.

"If I needed him, he would rise to the occasion," Vicki Futch said.

On January 30th, Greg Futch fell short of that ideal.

**'A DIFFERENT ZONE'**

It happened about once a month, sometimes twice. Greg Futch was in the throes of another mental health crisis.

"He would just go into a different zone," Vicki Futch said of her son.

On Tuesday, January 30, Vicki returned home from a doctor's appointment to find that her son was "out of his mind."

"He did not know what he was doing," she said.

Greg was acting more aggressive than usual, and got in Vicki's face. She pushed him back with a finger, and he slapped her. Greg hit Vicki Futch twice with a "half-closed fist," according to the police report. Vicki told the Times-Union he barely hit her, and she was not badly hurt.

Out of ideas on how to help her son, and shaken from the fight, Vicki Futch called or texted a Putnam County Sheriff's Office captain that she had been in touch with during the days leading up to the arrest.

Text messages between Vicki Futch and Capt. David Ussery show that he was responsive, even offering to help Futch fill out paperwork.

But Vicki Futch said Capt. Ussery told her before the fight that he would take Greg to the hospital later in the evening on that same Tuesday.

Even after a deputy responded and arrested Futch, the hospital is where she assumed he would end up.

Vicki Futch regrets making that assumption now. She said she had trusted that the system was equipped to handle someone like Greg.

"I had heard that the Putnam County Sheriff's Office was trained, the deputies were trained to deal with mental illness," Vicki Futch said. "I thought if he went to jail that they would take care of him, they would send him where he needed to go if he was sick physically or mentally."

When Deputy David Davis arrived, Vicki Futch told him Greg was hearing voices in his head and struck her in the face during an argument, according to the police report.

Deputy Davis then tried to speak to Greg Futch, the report continued, who expressed no interest in the conversation, instead repeating the words, "I believe in God."

The deputy arrested Futch for battery on a person 65 years of age or older, and booked him into the Putnam County Jail.

**JAN. 30-31: THE FIRST TWO DAYS**

Greg Futch was behaving strangely when he was booked on Jan. 30.

As a corrections officer escorted Futch from the booking area, he spun around in circles. The officer wrote in an incident report that he told Futch to walk in a straight line.

"I will walk the way I want to walk and you can't do a thing about it," Futch responded, according to the report. The officer put Futch in an arm lock and escorted him to the jail.

Despite being under mental duress, medical records indicate that Futch entered the jail at a healthy weight.

This would become an important finding for the Futch family lawyers, who located a form from a pain clinic Futch visited the day before he was arrested, complaining about his right shoulder.

The clinic recorded his weight at 154 pounds.

Futch refused breakfast the day after he was booked. Throughout his 16-day stay, he complained regularly that he couldn't keep food down. The complaints are noted throughout his jail records.

That night, on Jan. 31, a nurse checked Futch's vitals at 8:30 p.m. She noted "tenting" on Futch's skin, a sign of dehydration, according to jail medical records.

Also that day, someone on the medical staff ordered a 14-day health appraisal for Futch, but there is no record of it ever being performed.

#### **FEB. 1: HOSPITAL VISIT**

The next morning, on Feb. 1, Futch complained again of vomiting and not being able to hold food down.

Corrections deputies took Futch to the Putnam Community Medical Center to be seen by a doctor in the emergency room. He was admitted at 10:30 a.m.

Nurses noted Futch had low blood pressure, and an exam revealed that he also had "severe chronic obstructive lung disease," according to hospital records.

Futch's blood pressure was low, according to the records, and his urine tested positive for opiates and benzodiazepines.

The doctor diagnosed Futch with dehydration from throwing up, gave him an IV and prescribed a medicine to suppress the vomiting. He was sent back to jail around 1 p.m.

On the discharge note, a physician at the Putnam Community Medical Center instructed Futch's caregivers that "any significant change in condition or worsening of symptoms should prompt an immediate return to this or the closest emergency department or a call to 911."

For reasons that remain unclear, this advice wasn't followed.

About an hour after he returned to the Putnam County Jail, Futch got into another altercation, this time with an inmate.

The other inmate told corrections deputies that Futch grabbed and pushed him, and Futch did not deny it, according to the incident report.

While the deputies were figuring out what had happened, Futch was placed in solitary confinement because he was "showing signs of unusual behavior," the report said.

#### **FEB. 2-8: SYMPTOMS PERSIST**

The morning after he returned to jail, Futch was found on the floor of his cell yelling "I need fluids."

A nurse dispensed ondansetron, the medicine prescribed to help with his vomiting, according to jail records. She noted that Futch didn't have signs of dehydration.

Futch received one dose of ondansetron each of the next two days, but there aren't any clinical observations noted in his file. On Feb. 5, Futch refused lunch. He was given more ondansetron that day and the next.

On the morning of Feb. 7, Futch complained of difficulty breathing and was unable to stand up. A nurse noted his skin was "positive for tenting, and appears to be dehydrated."

That afternoon, Futch was moved to another unit in the jail.

"Claiming to have several medical issues, not walking, throwing himself onto the ground, moved so inmate cannot injure himself," movement records at the jail noted.

Later, on Feb. 7, the jail doctor, Patrick Harris, reported that Futch said he had been unable to keep any food down for the past two weeks.

"The only thing he can relate it to is that his aunt died recently," Harris wrote.

Harris ordered a psychiatric evaluation. The psychiatrist determined Futch was "malingering" or "acting out" to get attention.

Vicki Futch's lawyers have hired Robert Cohen, a veteran doctor who once oversaw medical care of more than 13,000 inmates at Rikers Island, to review the records of Futch's medical treatment.

In a damning 14-page report, Cohen concluded that the jail failed to obtain Futch's past medical history and ascertain any current medical issues. Futch had a serious mental illness with psychotic elements and a history of opiate use disorder, Cohen noted.

"Failure to obtain an initial history of Mr. Futch's serious mental illness resulted in a delay in diagnosis and treatment, and a mischaracterization of his behavior as malingering," Cohen wrote, adding that Futch should have been evaluated for opiate and alcohol withdrawal as well.

Dan Weiss, a civil rights lawyer from Colorado who regularly handles inmate medical claims, reviewed records from the Futch case. Weiss, who is not associated with the case, said it was hard for him to understand why medical staff at the jail were willing to send Futch to the hospital the first time, then allowed him to go without food or effective treatment for weeks afterward.

"Any person who was actually practicing medicine, who actually cared about the welfare of this human being, would have sent this guy back to the hospital," Weiss said.

#### **FEB. 9-15: FUTCH'S DECLINE**

The next few days in jail were more of the same for Futch.

Unable to keep down food, he refused his meals. Futch was given another prescription for gastrointestinal issues, though at times he went without it, because it wasn't stocked in the medicine cart.

On Feb. 10, Futch refused his medicine. The following day, a corporal at the jail wrote that Futch had not been eating for the last two days.

"When he does intake a little bit of food, he throws it up," the report said.

Officials at the jail started a daily meal intake form to record his refusals to eat. Those notations continued through the next several days. Refusing meals. Refusing medicine.

Futch didn't eat or take his medication on February 13, or the day after that.

A nurse noted that Futch said he would eat only if given medicine, but had "repeatedly refused all meds stating he wants psych meds only."

#### **FEB. 15-17: TRAGIC ENDING**

Everything took a turn for the worst on Feb. 15.

At 8:40 a.m., Officer Laura Lynn Jones reported that she and a group of officials responded to a medical emergency with Futch, who was laying on the floor "conscience (sic)." They took his vitals, put him back on the bed, and gave him water to drink.

At some point later that morning, Futch became unresponsive.

Officer Mark Bradford filed an incident report noting that he entered Futch's cell at about 9:40 a.m. yelling to see if he was okay. Futch did not respond.

He was placed in a wheelchair to be moved to a medical isolation cell. Futch urinated all over the floor and himself. Officers changed him into a new pair of shorts and lay him on a mattress on the isolation cell. A video from the cell documents the next hour, during which time Futch appears to never move on his own.

Futch's breathing was labored, according to medical records. His fingers were cold, and his skin was "mottled," a condition that often occurs before death.

Yet even as late as 10:40 a.m., Harris, the jail doctor, recommended that Futch remain in medical isolation at the Putnam County Jail.

Around 11 a.m., a major at the Sheriff's Office observed Futch's dire condition and ordered he be sent to the emergency room. Futch arrived at the Putnam Community Medical Center at 12:10 p.m. unconscious and cold to the touch, according to hospital records. He was in respiratory failure and required emergency intubation.

Futch had life-threateningly high levels of sodium in his blood, kidney failure, and was in shock because of dehydration, hospital records indicated.

Doctors met with Vicki Futch and other family members on February 16. They treated Futch aggressively at the family's request. It was not enough.

Futch died on February 17.

A day earlier, at the hospital, Vicki Futch said a prosecutor told her the state was dropping the charges against Futch.

#### **'EASILY PREVENTABLE'**

In a deceased person report, a Sheriff's Office's detective wrote that Futch died "of apparent natural causes."

His death certificate listed the causes as septic shock, pneumonia, acute respiratory failure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Cohen, the doctor and expert witness hired by the Futch family, said Futch died of multi-organ failure due to "severe protein and calorie malnutrition, along with severe dehydration secondary to not eating or drinking for two weeks." He called the death "easily preventable."

"Their inaction, while fully aware of his deteriorating medical condition, is inexcusable and terribly disturbing," Cohen wrote.

The reasons for Futch's constant vomiting "are not clear," Cohen wrote. They could have been due to benzodiazepine withdrawal, an underlying problem with his gastrointestinal system, or an underlying psychiatric problem, he noted.

Futch's abysmal condition was clear to corrections staff, conveyed by medical staff, Cohen added.

"Dr. Harris and the medical staff watched Mr. Futch die from starvation and dehydration," he wrote. "They documented that he wasn't eating, and did nothing."

#### **LIFE WITHOUT GREG**

Vicki Futch said she was completely unaware of Greg's medical issues in jail.

She said she didn't even find out he was in the emergency room on Feb. 1 until she got a letter from hospital staff about a week later.

Immediately after his arrest, Vicki Futch reached back out to Captain Ussery, pleading with him to get Greg the help he needed.

Over the next several days, Vicki and other family members contacted the jail multiple times while Greg was there attempting to get on his visitor's list, she said. The Futch family was told Greg would need to enter their names on a computer, but he didn't know how to use it, Vicki Futch said. They tried to get jail staff to help, but no one did, she added.

A few days after the fight, Vicki Futch said, she was told by a detective that she couldn't bail him out because she was the listed victim on the battery case.

Vicki Futch felt like she had no other choice but to wait and hope Greg would get the help he needed.

"I didn't know what to do," Futch said. "I thought, 'Well surely they are going to take care of him, and if he needs medical help they will take him.'"

Vicki spends much of her days now saddled with guilt, wishing she had never called the police. She said Greg "didn't do a thing to deserve to be in jail, not a thing."

"We took care of each other when we went through a bad time, and I would try to do everything I could," Futch said. "This last time, I just went to the wrong people for help."

At that point, Vicki Futch began to cry.

"If they had just called me," she said. "If they had just called me."