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Second case of excited delirium, coroner decides

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Photo provided

Jason Nalls Died in June

WATERVILLE — For the second time this year, excited delirium has been determined to be the cause of death of a NCW resident who died in custody.

It is the cause of death of Jason Nalls, 40, of Waterville, said Steve Clem, Douglas County coroner and prosecutor. The determination was made by Dr. Gina Fino, a contract forensic pathologist, who also determined that excited delirium was the cause of death on an inmate in the Chelan County Regional Justice Center. That man died June 29.

Clem said he received Fino's determination late last week.

The incidents are the first times that excited delirium has been a cause of death in either of the two counties, according to local law enforcement officers and medical personnel.

A Taser was used on Nalls but was not used on the inmate who died in jail, officials have said.

Nalls died July 23 after he took control of a Douglas County sheriff's patrol car and dragged a deputy about two blocks in Waterville. The deputy was not badly injured.

Deputies had responded to Nalls' house about 10 p.m. July 22 after Nalls reported someone shooting at his house. The shooting was not confirmed.

While deputies were at his house, Nalls locked himself in the bathroom, according to Undersheriff John Wisemore of the Chelan County Sheriff's Office, which investigated the incident.

Nalls later ran out of the house and could not be located. About 1 a.m. a deputy located Nalls about two blocks from his home.

When the deputy got out of his car, Nalls got into the driver's seat of the patrol car and began driving away, dragging the deputy about two blocks. The patrol car went into Pioneer Park, struck an embankment and stopped.

The deputy then tried to deploy a Taser. The Taser hit Nalls, but Wisemore said investigators have not determined whether it made enough contact to affect Nalls.

A second deputy arrived at the scene about that time, and the two deputies struggled with Nalls before they were able to get him in handcuffs, investigators said.

A neighbor who videotaped the incident said in an interview that the second deputy arrived shortly after Nalls was handcuffed.

About a minute after the handcuffs were placed on him, the deputies noticed that Nalls had become unresponsive and stopped breathing, investigators said. They started CPR, and emergency crews arrived and took over unsuccessful life-saving efforts.

An autopsy of Nalls found no outward signs of trauma, investigators said.

Bonnie Davis of Leavenworth, Nalls mother, said this morning she had no comment on the cause of death determination.

On June 29, Jesse Avina Morales, 21, died after what Wenatchee police say was a 16-minute struggle with corrections officers inside the Chelan County Regional Justice Center.

The Chelan County coroner ruled the cause of death as excited delirium with hypertensive heart disease.

Records do not exist on the prevalence of excited delirium — neither the Centers for Disease Control nor the state Department of Health track the condition — but excited delirium deaths make headlines when law enforcement is involved.

Local law enforcement officers and emergency medical responders say they have had little or no training in dealing with excited delirium. Officials said after the cause of death was determined on Avina Morales that they need such training.

Dr. Joseph Tornabene, a Wenatchee neurologist, said excited delirium happens when the body's cardiovascular system has ramped up to heightened blood pressure, and abnormally high heart and breathing rates. At the same time, neurotransmitters in the brain release what Tornabene called "a cascade" of hormones.

"It's a very deep-seated physiological brain response to being endangered in some way," Tornabene said.

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