

Taxpayers on hook for \$600K spent treating suspects injured in shootouts with Bellingham police

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Pastor Lopez-Franco, 20, makes his first appearance in Whatcom County Superior Court on Monday, Sept. 9, on charges of holding up a Bellingham gas station, leading police on a high-speed chase and firing four shotgun rounds at pursuing officers. Lopez-Franco, a resident of Brewster, had spent the last month in Harborview Medical Center with bullet wounds. His bail was set at \$1.5 million.

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BELLINGHAM - In two separate incidents in August, men fired shotguns at Bellingham police officers. Unhurt, the police fired back, seriously injuring a 54-year-old with a history of mental illness and a 20-year-old accused of robbing a convenience store and leading police on a chase up Mount Baker Highway.

Both men, now in the Whatcom County Jail awaiting trial, had extended stays in area hospitals. Pastor Lopez-Franco, 20, took several bullets on Aug. 8 after crashing his car at East Smith Road. He spent a month at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle and made his first court appearance in a wheelchair. Alexander Warren Johnson, 54, exchanged fire with police on Aug. 26 at the Villa Inn on Samish Way. He was at St. Joseph hospital for about a week being treated for gunshot wounds to his torso.

The inmates aren't insured, so their medical bills are being paid for by Whatcom County and Bellingham taxpayers, Sheriff Bill Elfo wrote in an email to The Bellingham Herald.

"While it is distasteful to taxpayers" to pay for care for people charged with robbery or assault with a firearm, state law requires it, Elfo said.

The County Council approved last week \$660,730 to pay for doctors, hospitals and overtime for King County corrections officers who guarded Lopez-Franco at Harborview.

The amount elicited a "wow" from council member Ken Mann in an Oct. 22 meeting. The vote that evening to approve the money was practically a formality.

"I know there is no option to just deny them medical care once they're in our custody," Mann said.

The final cost of treating the two defendants is not yet known, Elfo said.

"While substantial discounts have been obtained (from the health care providers), we have not yet received all medical bills," Elfo said on Wednesday, Oct. 30.

Because both arrests were made by Bellingham police, the city will reimburse the county, Elfo said.

Suspects on Medicaid lose their health coverage once they are in police custody. That puts the first responsibility for medical bills in the hands of the agency that runs the jail where they were booked. The Affordable Care Act apparently will do nothing to change that, Elfo said.

The financial burden would be even more extreme for small jurisdictions such as Sumas or Everson, the sheriff said.

"For some of our smaller cities, an expense such as this could ... either bankrupt the city or cause it to drastically reduce service," Elfo said.

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