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Courthouse attacker found competent

By Brionna Friedrich
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Steven D. Kravetz, right, and his attorney, David Arcuri, listen to Grays Harbor Prosecutor Stew Menefee speak.



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Steven D. Kravetz is released from his restraints for his competency hearing in Lewis County Wednesday.

Accused courthouse attacker Steven D. Kravetz was deemed competent to stand trial by a Lewis County Superior Court judge after two evaluations and a three-hour hearing Wednesday.

Kravetz, 34, of McCleary, is charged with attempted second-degree murder, assault and disarming a law enforcement officer for allegedly shooting a Sheriff's deputy and stabbing a Superior Court judge during a violent confrontation on March 9 at the County Courthouse in Montesano.

Kravetz's attorney, David Arcuri, strenuously objected to the idea that his client was competent to stand trial. He told Judge Richard Brosey that Kravetz would repeatedly call his office, on one day cut off at 27 calls, but when Arcuri tried to discuss the case, he said he could not get Kravetz to focus or participate in his own defense.

"Do not force me to work with this man without further mental help," Arcuri said. "It is impossible right now for me to represent him in his current state."

An initial review was conducted by two doctors from Western State Hospital at the county jail.

Typical procedure is that a psychiatrist at the hospital reviews the report from that interview, and if he or she concurs with all the findings, a competency review can be held.

In this case, the reviewing doctor concurred that Kravetz fully understood the legal process and his charges, but disagreed with the interviewers that Kravetz was a paranoid schizophrenic unable to focus on his current charges.

Dr. Marilyn Ronnei, a psychologist with Western State, was one of Kravetz's reviewers and principal author on the report finding he was not competent to participate in his defense. She testified she has been doing competency and mental status evaluations exclusively since 2001, estimating she'd done more than 1,000.

Ronnei told the court that during her two-hour interview with Kravetz, she was unable to get him to talk about his current charges. She said he was fixated on a 2005 case in which his mother told authorities he had threatened to commit suicide. At the hospital, doctors tried to get a urine sample to test for any drugs, but Kravetz resisted and escaped the hospital through a bathroom window before being recovered.

"Mr. Kravetz did not wish to do this, he viewed it as an invasion of his privacy, and when he was threatened with catheterization, he viewed it as a threat of sexual assault," Ronnei testified. "He viewed that as a turning point in his life. It was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. Since that time, he viewed Grays Harbor County as having it in for him."

Ronnei added that based on her interview, Kravetz believes "Grays Harbor County has an organized conspiracy against him. ... It reaches the proportion of a delusion."

According to court documents, Kravetz's reason for being in the courthouse on the day of the attack this year was to attempt to steal the court files related to the 2005 incident.

Ronnei said the diagnosis that fit best after the interview was paranoid schizophrenia, which wouldn't necessarily mean Kravetz was not competent to stand trial, but in his case he refused to address the charges because of his intense focus on the previous case. She said he insisted the current case against him was a result of the 2005 case.

“He’s going to have a lot of trouble assisting his attorney because he insists on focusing on this 2005 case,” Ronnei said.

A key part of their diagnosis was information from Kravetz’s mother about apparent auditory hallucinations, although the interviewers did not observe any sign of them.

“She said at times he appeared to be talking to people who were not there. She would walk into a room and he would be carrying on a conversation,” Ronnei said.

The stress of the approaching court dates might cause Kravetz to “decompensate further” — or fail to use effective coping mechanisms and lapse into a worse mental state — she said.

The report also stated the doctors’ concern that Kravetz would not be able to testify consistently, intelligently and rationally.

Ronnei said her recommendation had been for competency restoration treatments, including therapy and possibly forced medication. “The odds of this spontaneously remitting are infinitesimal,” she said.

Another doctor, however, testified that is apparently what happened after Kravetz arrived at Western State.

Dr. Margaret Dean, the psychiatrist charged with reviewing the report, testified that she was not confident enough of the diagnosis based on the interview to take away Kravetz’s right to refuse medication and treatment. Dean said she has also performed more than 1,000 evaluations. She had Kravetz brought to Western State for a 15-day evaluation.

The inpatient evaluation has a number of advantages over jailhouse interviews, Dean said, not the least of which is the 24-hour observation and meticulous record-keeping by a multi-disciplinary team.

While in the hospital, Kravetz was supposed to have an in-depth interview with Dean, who specializes in forensic psychiatry, but he declined the day of the interview after talking with Arcuri. Arcuri objected to speculation that it was a result of advice from him.

Dean said Kravetz did have numerous short interviews with her and other doctors, nurses, orderlies and a social worker, none of whom observed the delusional behavior described in his initial interview.

Dean found Kravetz to be more in keeping with schizotypal personality disorder, a lower-level disorder than his initial diagnosis.

“Basically, schizotypal personality disorder is a pervasive, lifelong part of how one sees oneself and others. ... These individuals are sometimes misdiagnosed as schizophrenic because they’re very uncomfortable in social situations except with first-degree relatives ... and have unusual obsessions and eccentric behavior,” she testified.

The disorder would not respond to treatment, and in fact Kravetz could view forced medication as a serious trauma and fixate on that as well, Dean said.

While Kravetz did still seem somewhat fixated on his 2005 case, Dean said by all accounts from hospital staff, he appeared able to control whether he discussed it. “It’s unusual, but it’s not a bizarre delusion,” she added. Some of the schizophrenics at the hospital have delusions like NASA satellites watching them or implants in their bodies that shock them when they disobey, Dean said.

A personality disorder does not inherently make a defendant incompetent, and Dean said Kravetz did seem able to participate in his defense. “It’s unusual, it can cause problems,” she said. “It might make him a difficult client for his attorney, but ... it is my opinion he has both the capacity to understand the nature of the proceedings and assist in his own defense.

Grays Harbor Prosecutor Stew Menefee said the standard of competency only requires a defendant be able to minimally participate in his or her defense.

“The question is a minimal question,” he argued.

Menefee also contended that Kravetz’s fixation on his 2005 case might not be so unusual, given that his reason for being at the courthouse was to steal the relevant file.

“He is justifying what happened as to why he was stealing that file,” Menefee said. “One could see how a layperson might believe this was highly relevant.”

Arcuri was highly critical of the inpatient evaluation, particularly on the point that Kravetz was never pressed on his case and only observed following simple hospital protocols without incident.

He argued that “15 days of watching Mr. Kravetz walk around like a zombie” was not likely to offer insight to his competency like the more intensive jailhouse interview, and asked Brosey to consider a more in-depth 90-day review.

“It has been virtually impossible to discuss with him in any meaningful fashion the facts of this case,” Arcuri said. “All he wants to do is go back to the 2005 case.”

Arcuri also criticized Dean’s diagnosis, saying he told the court before the inpatient evaluation that Dean would find Kravetz competent because Arcuri had “seen her work before.”

Brosey took exception to that idea, praising the plain language and competency of Dean. He said based on the testimony, Kravetz was currently competent but acknowledged that might change under various stresses of the trial.

“Especially when someone is in jail, they can decompensate. I’ve seen that a number of times,” Brosey said. As of Wednesday, however, “I believe he is competent to stand trial.”

Arraignment was set for Sept. 7 in Lewis County Superior Court. Kravetz is held in Grays Harbor County Jail with \$900,000 bail.

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