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Abandoned in time of need

Glace Bay couple left without home care for adult son after accusing worker of stealing

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GLACE BAY — David Jones has been unable to feed himself since age 17 and is virtually incapable of moving his body below the neck.

Now 39, the Glace Bay man has depended on others for his daily survival ever since severe juvenile rheumatoid arthritis twisted and hardened his body to the point where his fingers and toes are curled into tight claws.

So it's not surprising he wasn't able to stop a predator inside his home when his parents left him in the care of a trusted, government-funded agency for five days a week.

Cape Breton Regional Police have charged David's home-care worker of 15 years, an employee of the New Waterford Homemaker Service Society, with a single count of theft allegedly committed in 2005.

David's parents Leonard and Marilyn Jones, now in their 60s and with their own health problems, say they believe the once-trusted caregiver stole a lot from them over the years — everything from doormats and cash to gold jewelry, tools and appliances, all gone inexplicably missing.

The woman was eventually caught on a hidden camera; her trial is set for Thursday in Sydney provincial court.

"I'd rather just forget about it," David said in an interview. "She wasn't who she said. I think she was sort of an act."

Over the years David's parents blamed the missing items on each other, given that they were "passing like ships in the night," with his father employed full time in security at Halifax Stanfield International Airport and his mother working at Sydney's federal citizenship and immigration office as well as caring for David.

"Our marriage almost fell apart," said a teary-eyed Ms. Jones, noting that in the past two years she has developed a potentially fatal eating disorder. She said she weighs less than 95 pounds, having lost almost 100 pounds since first reporting their doubts about the caregiver. Her husband's hip also needs to be replaced.

They began to suspect something was wrong in 2005 when the caregiver failed to pay them for a \$400 prom dress charged in Ms. Jones's name at a Sydney dress shop.

Then they started thinking about all the things that had been going missing and, reluctantly, reported their suspicions to the homemaker service, which decided to investigate. The agency paid a security firm to install a hidden camera inside a wreath in a bedroom, where \$50 was hidden in a jewelry box. It didn't take long for the camera to record a hand reaching in and taking the money.

The society immediately fired the caregiver, and police, armed with the videotape, laid the theft charge.

But then the unfathomable happened — after 15 years of providing continuous home care to David, the agency withdrew all its services.

"As a result of those allegations, we conducted an investigation and concluded (the caregiver's) conduct in her relationship with you was incompatible with her continued employment with the society," said a letter from the society dated Dec. 5, 2005.

"In the course of our consideration of this entire matter, we have regrettably come to the conclusion that it is likewise inappropriate for the society to have an ongoing relationship with your family and, accordingly, this is to advise that our decision to discontinue service is permanent."

The letter also asks the couple to keep quiet about the issue, as "such activities . . . are unpleasant for our staff and counterproductive."

Because the homemaker society is the only government-funded caregiver agency that has Glace Bay in its jurisdiction, and because a hospital bed was not available for David, his parents say they were forced into early retirement.

"He's our boy, and we love him," Mr. Jones said. "He's my responsibility. He's my child."

Asked why the society still continues to abandon David, executive director Janet Wilcox has twice refused comment.

"As an agency of the Department of Health, I'm really not allowed to confidentially speak in regards to any clients or to verify anything like that," she said.

The Health Department has also declined comment on the case.

Crown attorney Gerald MacDonald, who will prosecute the case, said adult diversion is possible for first-time offenders on summary conviction if they have no prior criminal record. Adult diversion is a process that leaves an offender with no criminal record if they meet specified terms of probation in a set time frame. It could mean an offender would be allowed to return to a bondable job.

"There's going to be no justice for us," Ms. Jones said as her son listened from his nearby room.

"We're the only ones who are being punished," she said. "We've been emotionally traumatized, financially scarred, morally scarred, physically scarred and mentally scarred."

The family says it was abandoned by the Health Department, which, after the family went almost a full year without any home health-care support, recently restored services through the VON.

Ms. Jones said she also has had to train nurses to handle David's health needs, despite her own physical limitations.

Family friend Karen Green MacIver wrote the Health Department on the treatment the Joneses have received since the home-care service was withdrawn.

"The level of service is nowhere consistent with the level they are entitled to and have received prior to this situation over the last 15 years," she wrote.

"It is my understanding that every individual is entitled to adequate health care. . . . This situation has gone on far too long and has caused great emotional and physical strain for the Jones family and those individuals involved in trying to resolve this very tragic situation."

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