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County mental center blasted

Victim's family slams release of suspect

By Christina Jewett - Bee Staff Writer

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The family of a 31-year-old woman who was stabbed to death Sunday afternoon -- allegedly by her ex-boyfriend -- are outraged that the man was released from the Sacramento County Mental Health Treatment Center the day before the slaying.

Darcelle Steward, sister of victim Laura Yvonne Steward, said the death could have been prevented if Paso Deshawn Harrison, 31, had been held longer after he tried to kill himself on the Fourth of July.

"They should not have let him go," the 37-year-old Steward said in her deceased sister's southeast Sacramento home Monday. "They should have notified my sister. They knew his state of mind."

The facility's medical director, Martin Leamon, would not confirm that Harrison was a patient at the facility or comment on his case, citing medical confidentiality laws.

But officials at the 100-bed, county-run mental facility said their protocol is to assess patients before they are released.

Psychiatrists have the option of keeping people longer than typical 72-hour involuntary holds if they are deemed to be a threat to themselves or others, Leamon said.

Also, psychiatrists are legally bound to notify an intended victim if a patient indicates a desire to harm the person.

Police say that before the stabbing Harrison was arguing with Steward in the parking lot of Methodist Hospital in south Sacramento about noon Sunday. Harrison allegedly stabbed Steward several times in the chest.

Steward staggered toward the hospital's front doors, but collapsed short of the entrance, police say. She was pronounced dead minutes later.

Nearby, the couple's 17-month-old son was strapped into a car seat.

Harrison, with the son in the car, apparently drove about six miles north and approached an officer at a Franklin Boulevard drive-through restaurant. He carried a bloody knife, police said.

Harrison was detained and later arrested on suspicion of homicide and a parole violation.

The killing left Steward's family reeling Monday. Her sisters, Donita Steward-Wiley, 38, and Darcelle Steward said they were constantly at her side. They say they loved her ambition, her artistic flair and her outgoing ways.

Steward's death came at the end of a series of attempts to distance herself from Harrison, Steward-Wiley

said.

Steward did some clerical work for the state Franchise Tax Board and sold purses as a side business. She wanted a partner who would enhance her life, Steward-Wiley said.

Steward grew disgusted with Harrison in November and repeatedly refused to talk to him or see him. Still, he called her, stopped by and sent her text messages constantly, Steward-Wiley said.

On the Fourth of July, Steward-Wiley said, Harrison went to Steward's home, where she had just set up a new couch in the living room.

Steward sent him away late in the morning, telling him she didn't want him to ruin the holiday for her and her three children.

"She was done with him," Steward-Wiley said tearfully. "She was done with him."

Steward-Wiley believes Harrison was trying to upset Steward with his next move: He drank Drano and drove a car into a tree in a suicide attempt, she said.

Steward-Wiley said Harrison was taken to UC Davis Medical Center and then admitted to the Mental Health Treatment Center across Stockton Boulevard.

Steward-Wiley said Harrison called Steward from the center.

"She told him he knew better, that everything he did was self-inflicted," Steward-Wiley said.

Still, Steward-Wiley said her sister picked up her 17-month-old son and walked out of her house Sunday morning, hours before her death.

"She didn't say 'I'll be back,' " Steward-Wiley said. "She just left."

Steward-Wiley said family members will care for the 17-month-old boy Steward had with Harrison, as well as 11- and 8-year-old daughters she had with another man.

Steward-Wiley said she hoped officials at the Mental Health Treatment Center would take a cue from the slaying and scrutinize exiting patients more carefully.

"I think this should be a wake-up call for that department," Steward-Wiley said. "They need to do a full evaluation and make sure the next life is not taken."

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