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CRIME

Lawsuit reveals new details of Exeter woman's slaying at Timberland



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CONCORD – The family of the Timberland marketing director who was killed at the company's Stratham headquarters last year has filed a federal lawsuit against the company that employed the security guard charged with her murder.

Michael Cormier, husband of the late Catherine “Cassie” Heppner, filed suit in New Hampshire District Court against the Swedish global security firm Securitas Security Services.

The suit claims Securitas negligently hired Robert Pavao, 21, of Berwick, despite alleged “red flags” about his psychological state. The firm was contracted to provide security guards for Timberland’s offices.

What do prosecutors say about the day Cassie Heppner died?

Police allege Pavao was on duty Feb. 9, 2020, when he allegedly stabbed Heppner, who went into work on a Sunday to assemble several products for an upcoming business trip. She was 46 and a mother.

‘She had biggest heart’: Exeter mourns woman killed at Timberland

Pavao has pleaded not guilty to first-degree and second-degree murder charges in Rockingham Superior Court and is currently behind bars awaiting trial.

According to the first-degree murder indictment, Pavao knowingly caused the death of Heppner by stabbing her “before, after, and/or while engaged in the commission of, or while attempting to commit felonious sexual assault.”

What is the case against Securitas Security Services?

The 12-count lawsuit requests a jury trial, and compensation for damages and costs endured by Heppner's estate, as well as her lost earning power due to her death.

"Securitas is on notice because they should've been doing a heckuva lot more because this guy was hired with no screening," said Mark Abramson, one of Cormier's attorneys, of Abramson, Brown & Dugan.

According to the lawsuit, the contract between Timberland and Securitas required all security guards assigned to the post "would be fully trained" and "undergo drug testing" performed by a certified testing lab.

Obituary: Catherine "Cassie" Heppner, 1973-2020

The suit alleges Securitas did not contact any of the personal references for Pavao when they hired him in 2019, nor did the company have him take a drug test certified by a lab.

The suit claims Pavao worked 57 unsupervised shifts at Timberland from Oct. 5, 2019, through Feb. 8, 2020, and he was previously observed by his colleague as being "antisocial" and demonstrating "significant anxiety."

Before the murder, while Pavao was supervised by another security guard, the lawsuit states Pavao asked him if Timberland's security cameras possessed audio recording capability. When the security guard reportedly claimed he did not know, Pavao allegedly responded by saying, "If they see me on the camera, they will see me screaming."

"The superior guard considered Mr. Pavao's statement about screaming to mean that Mr. Pavao had had a breakdown while at work and believed the comment was a serious red flag, but he did not report it to anyone else," the suit reads. "The superior guard believed that Pavao had smoked marijuana at work, and that he used other drugs like mushrooms and LSD. He did not report these concerns to anyone."

The suit notes that Securitas' own handbook states the use of substances on the clock is grounds for dismissal and that employees should report anything that looks mildly suspicious. It also states the contract with Timberland states Securitas will screen all security guards and not assign anyone to Timberland who posed "a significant risk to the health and safety of others" or who exhibited "violent or physically abusive behavior."

New details of Cassie Heppner's murder alleged in lawsuit

The lawsuit also contains new details surrounding Heppner's murder, allegedly at the hands of Pavao, who is described in the complaint as having, "endured a brutal childhood and was abandoned by his birth parents as a young boy." The suit goes on to claim Pavao "regularly used drugs during high school and afterwards."

"(Pavao's) adolescence was marked by learning disabilities, apparent social delays, a complicated sexual identity, and intense anger towards his birth mother, with whom he had no contact," the lawsuit states.

According to the suit, at approximately 3:20 p.m. on Feb. 9, 2020, Pavao is seen on security footage using a key issued to him to open a locked door for Heppner.

The lawsuit states Pavao entered the area where Heppner was, and he was not seen again on the security camera until emerging from the storage room at approximately 3:42 p.m. with blood visible on his hand.

Pavao allegedly called his mother at approximately 4:13 to say, "he hurt someone at work," before calling 911 at approximately 4:25 p.m., according to the lawsuit.

When first responders arrived, Pavao is allegedly again seen on security footage directing them to a room where he said a person was stabbed, according to the lawsuit.

The suit then states, Pavao was asked if he stabbed the person and allegedly replied, "I don't know."

None of the facts alleged in the lawsuit have been made public in Pavao's criminal case, and the affidavit, which summarizes law enforcement's alleged facts of the case, remains sealed.

Additionally, the lawsuit outlines numerous instances where security guards Securitas hired committed violent felonies dating back to 2004, most notably in Charlottesville, Virginia when Securitas guard James Fields Jr. drove a car into a crowd of anti-white supremacist protesters, killing one in 2017.

The suit also named Cadient as a defendant. The North Carolina company was used by Securitas to provide an online assessment to help the company screen competent candidates for security guard positions. Pavao passed the screening with no concerning qualities or red flags. The company has filed a motion to dismiss Cormier's lawsuit.

What is response from Securitas about lawsuit and Robert Pavao?

Securitas has yet to respond to the lawsuit in court. A representative of the company did not respond to an email seeking comment.

In a statement after the murder, the company said “Securitas USA is deeply saddened by the events that took place in Stratham, N.H. The company is cooperating fully with New Hampshire law enforcement officials. Because the matter is an ongoing criminal investigation, the company is not able to comment further.”