

Claims filed against Fresno County public administrator in estate thefts

By Marc Benjamin
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Before Kathleen Rankin Moore died in early 2014, she and her daughter, Patricia Craveiro, went through an antique wicker basket filled with family memorabilia dating back more than 100 years.

There were photographs; birth, marriage and death certificates; and other historical documents dating back to Craveiro's great-grandmother's voyage from England to America around Cape Horn.

But when Craveiro, who lives in Oregon, got a telephone call last year from the Fresno County Public Administrator's Office to retrieve her family's photographs and letters, she got a box filled with another family's mementos.

"There was not one person in those photos that I have ever seen or known," Craveiro said.

It was the beginning of a series of disturbing revelations about her mother's possessions.

Craveiro has filed a claim against Fresno County for \$72,150, the estimated value of items she says are missing from her mother's estate. She believes some items were taken by employees of the Fresno County Public Administrator's Office, which is under investigation by the state Attorney General's Office.

County supervisors are expected Tuesday to reject the claim without discussion. That will allow Craveiro and another family in a similar situation to file lawsuits.

An investigation of the Public Administrator's Office by the Fresno County District Attorney's Office began earlier this year. District Attorney Lisa Smittcamp announced in June that her office had found indications that theft was occurring by public administrator employees. The investigation was later transferred to the state attorney general for possible prosecution. Charges have not been filed.

At the time, three of four employees in the Public Administrator's Office were under suspicion, Smittcamp said. The Public Administrator's Office was under the Fresno County coroner until January, when the District Attorney's Office was given oversight of the department. The Coroner's Office is now under the Fresno County Sheriff's Office.

The three public administrator employees have left their jobs with the county.

The Fresno County District Attorney's Office said there have been fewer than 10 theft claims filed since the Public Administrator's Office came under scrutiny.

Tracking missing property

In Craveiro's discussions with investigators, she learned that the alleged malfeasance dates back three years and that there could be hundreds of incidents.

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Patricia Craveiro, whose claim says Fresno County improperly administered her mother's estate

Craveiro said she never was given a list of items retrieved from her mother's 4,000-square-foot Fig Garden home. She also was never offered information about items sold at auction until she asked about specific pieces.

“Without a list of the contents to reconcile what was in the house and not knowing what was sold, it was very hard for me to come up with missing items,” Craveiro said.

When she last visited her mother four months before her death in February 2014, Craveiro said the house was filled with the items she recalled from earlier visits. Since then, she doesn’t know what happened to antiques, furniture, jewelry, silverware, china and a motorcycle that were at her mother’s home.

A pickup truck allegedly was stolen after the Public Administrator’s Office took possession of the estate, she said.

Craveiro said her concerns grew over the months she was working with the Public Administrator’s Office even though her conversations with employees were pleasant.

But in April, she got a call from an investigator working with the District Attorney’s Office. He told Craveiro they had found pawn shop receipts for jewelry. One particular item he mentioned caught her attention – a 1967 pledge pin from her sorority that she quickly identified based on its distinctiveness.

The investigator told her that “jewelry was listed as content property taken from my mother’s house, yet his records show jewelry was pawned for the price of gold and precious stone money,” Craveiro said in a letter written to the county in July.

Craveiro said the family was expecting significantly more money from the auction, especially since her mother had a large home filled with antiques, including a hand-carved, 1890 Brunswick-Balke pool table that had been appraised at \$20,000. Craveiro said she was told the pool table sold for a few hundred dollars.

Fresno County Counsel Dan Cederborg said items are sometimes not listed as inventory, which is why the Public Administrator’s Office used two people to catalog items.

He said a problem occurs when two people are in on a plot to steal items, as is theorized in the investigation into the Public Administrator’s Office.

Now, he said, “it’s under a situation where it’s watched more.”

After the county took over, some of his property went missing.

Donna Kincade, who claims her brother’s estate was mishandled by Fresno County

Mishandleld estate?

A second claim was filed by Donna Kincade of Fresno and her sister, Susan Stone of Modesto. They say the Public Administrator’s Office mishandled their cousin’s estate. Scott Kallam, who died in 2013 in Fresno, had no immediate family. By the time his estate was liquidated, each of 10 extended family members received \$91 and change after expenses.

Kincade and Stone are not sure what was missing from Kallam’s estate. But they believe the estate was mismanaged. They say there were missing items next to numbers in the full inventory of possessions.

“After the county took over, some of his property went missing,” Kincade said.

Each time they called the Public Administrator’s Office, Stone said, they were told they would get a call when their work was finished.

The family filed a claim with the county and investigators have spoken with them, Kincade said. The family said many of Kallam’s valuables were missing, but unlike Craveiro, they haven’t been informed about any specific items surfacing.

In the claim, the family said it was “knowingly misinformed and blatantly lied to.”

The sisters estimated Kallam’s estate was valued at \$250,000. One item sold was a 1933 Ford Coupe that Kallam was restoring. Its value was estimated at \$45,000, but it sold at auction for \$16,000, Kincade said.

In its petition to Fresno County Superior Court, county counsel reported that many of the car’s parts were in boxes because Kallam was in the process of repainting it. The county also said the car didn’t run and that parts were missing.

“Families are often surprised how little property can be sold for at public and private auction,” Heather Kruthers, a senior deputy county counsel who represented the Public Administrator’s Office, wrote in a court document about Kallam’s estate.

Fresno estate lawyer Matthew Farmer said there may be rational explanations for gaps in inventory numbers or numbers being out of sequence, suggesting that it doesn’t necessarily point to “nefarious activity.”

He hasn’t seen claims related to the Public Administrator’s Office, but said there may be a logical explanation.

Farmer said that auctions frequently don’t return the value expected by families.

“Sometimes people have emotional connections,” he said. “Family members may think or believe something is worth more than it is.”

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Questions

If you have any questions or concerns on how a decedent’s estate was handled, you can contact Fresno County officials at 559-600-2115 or 855-600-6595 toll free or email them at publicadmin@co.fresno.ca.us. The email must include the following information:

- Decedent’s name and address
- Decedent’s date of death
- Your contact information
- Your relationship to the decedent