

Judge finalizes settlement in strip-search lawsuit



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10:00 PM PDT on Monday, March 31, 2008

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The Press-Enterprise

A settlement was finalized in federal court Monday in a lawsuit that alleged strip searches at San Bernardino County jails humiliated inmates.

Roughly 21,000 class-action members in the suit against San Bernardino County will receive from \$350 to \$1,500, according to the plaintiffs' lead attorney, Barry Litt.

"We are very pleased," he said.

The settlement was virtually unchanged from the tentative agreement signed in September by U.S. District Court Judge Stephen G. Larson. Claimants will share a \$25.5 million settlement minus 25 percent slated for attorneys' fees, Litt said.

Originally, as many as 160,000 jail inmates were eligible to participate in the suit.

Larson is expected to sign the finalized agreement by today, Litt said.

The suit alleged that body-cavity searches were performed with little regard for modesty, at times in view of jail visitors and law enforcement officers of the opposite sex.

The complaints stemmed from searches at West Valley Detention Center in Rancho Cucamonga and Central Detention Center in San Bernardino, performed over 4½ years from May 2003 to December.

The suit also contended that searches were performed on inmates in groups and regardless of the severity of criminal offense.

County authorities have said that strip-searching is a key security measure meant to keep law enforcement officers and inmates safe.

As part of the settlement, San Bernardino County officials perform strip searches only on inmates who have been arrested on drug or weapons charges or if there is reasonable suspicion that they may be smuggling contraband.

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