

## Keith Longtin Paid \$7.5 Million After Being Falsely Charged With His Wife's Murder

Keith Longtin has been paid more than \$7.5 million by Prince George County, Maryland for violating his state constitutional rights after detectives targeted him as a suspect in the murder of his estranged wife. Donna Zinetti's body was found on October 4, 1999 in a wooded area near her apartment in Laurel, Maryland where she had been jogging. Zinetti, 36, had been raped and stabbed 13 times in the face, neck and chest.

Although there was no physical evidence or eyewitness placing the 43-year-old Longtin at the scene of his wife's murder, he was considered the prime suspect after Prince George County detectives learned the couple had quarreled the day before her murder. Detectives picked-up Longtin and he was interrogated for 38 hours by a team of detectives — 28 hours straight and then for almost another 10 hours straight after he was allowed to rest for only 50 minutes. The detectives alleged that Longtin admitted arguing with his wife on the day of her murder and picking up a knife and chasing after her when she left to go jogging. Longtin's interrogation wasn't audio or video recorded. He denied making the incriminating statement and that he had in fact repeatedly told the detectives he did not kill his wife. The detectives ignored several requests by Longtin to talk with a lawyer and he was unable to reach two lawyers that he tried to call. (Longtin's cell phone records confirm that he tried to call the two lawyers.)

Longtin was charged on October 7, 1999 with his wife's murder based on his alleged confession.

Maryland's Police Crime Laboratory informed the Prince George County police on January 14, 2000 that Longtin's DNA was excluded as the source of sperm recovered from his wife's body. The police did not inform the State's Attorney or Longtin's lawyer that he was excluded as his wife's assailant.

Although at the time of Zinetti's rape and murder a number of rapes had been committed in the area around her apartment, including the rape of one of her neighbors, and Nathaniel D. Oesby had been arrested as the suspected rapist — the police waited until March 2000 before submitting a sample of



Keith Longtin in April 2011

Oesby's DNA. Longtin was released the next day on a personal recognizance bond after being jailed for more than eight months. The murder charge was dismissed against Longtin in November 2000.

While incarcerated Longtin lost three automobiles, and after being evicted from his apartment for non-payment of rent he lost all his possessions that were left on the curb. While in the county detention center he was assaulted by an inmate, and he was not permitted to attend his wife's funeral. When Longtin was released he had "little more than the clothes on his back."

Oesby was convicted in June 2001 of Zinetti's rape and murder and he was sentenced to two terms of life in prison.

After sending Prince George County in October 2000 a notice of claim under the "Local Government Tort Claims Act" that the county ignored, Longtin filed a lawsuit in state court in October 2001 that named Prince George County, its then-chief of police, and 5 detectives in the county police department as defendants. Longtin's claims included that he had been falsely arrested and imprisoned without probable cause, and that he had been maliciously prosecuted.

After a two week trial, on August 31, 2006 a Circuit Court jury awarded Longtin \$5.2 million in compensatory damages against the county, and it also awarded him \$1.175 million in punitive damages against four detectives for violating his civil rights — \$275,000 each from three detectives and \$350,000 from the fourth.

The county filed a motion to vacate the judgment, but the judge only determined that it was excessive and reduced it to \$5.025 million against the county and \$50,000 against one of the detectives, for a total award of \$5.075 million.

The county appealed relying on arguments that included Longtin had filed his notice of claim late and the award against the county exceeded the tort claims act's compensatory damages limit of \$200,000. In January 2010

Oesby's DNA to the crime lab for comparison with the sperm recovered from Zinetti. On June 12, 2000 the police informed the State's Attorney's Office that Longtin was excluded as the source of the DNA found on Zinetti while it matched

Oesby's DNA. Longtin was released the next day on a personal recognizance bond after being jailed for more than eight months. The murder charge was dismissed against Longtin in November 2000.

Maryland's Court of Special Appeals ruled against the county in. The county then appealed to the Court of Appeals, which on April 25, 2011 ruled against the county — Longtin's notice of his claim was timely and the compensatory damages cap didn't apply to the violation of Longtin's state constitutional rights by Prince George County.

The Court of Appeals also established the right for plaintiffs to bring "pattern or practice" claims against local governments in a lawsuit. It was discovered after Longtin's release that detectives in Prince George County had a history of eliciting false confessions from suspects. So the "false confession" that Longtin's murder charge was based on was part of a "pattern or practice" of wrongdoing by the county's detectives that the jury could rely on in making their decision.

Longtin's lawyer Cary J. Hansel said about [the court's ruling](#):

"It's absolutely historic. Previously, Maryland courts were limited to reviewing each case piecemeal. Prior misconduct, even of the same nature, was often hidden from the jury, no matter how egregious or extensive. Now, where there is a history of abuse, juries will be made aware of prior civil rights violations."

The Court of Appeals is Maryland's highest court, so the county was out of legal options. The \$5.075 million award began accruing compound interest from the day of the jury's finding against the county on August 31, 2006 — so when it paid Longtin in mid-July 2011 the award had increased with interest to more than \$7.5 million. Longtin is now 55 and an ordained minister in Maryland.

A video of an interview of Keith Longtin after the appeals court ruling in April 2011 is at, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUoq4iGXNGs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUoq4iGXNGs)

The most complete source for the factual background of Longtin's case is the January 2010 opinion by Maryland's Court of Special Appeals, *Prince George's County v. Longtin*, [988 A. 2d 20](#) (Md Court of Special Appeals, 1-27-2010).

Sources:

"[Verdict Attacks](#) Police Grilling," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2006.

"[Man falsely charged](#) with murder in Prince George's wins appeal," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2011.

"[Wrongly accused](#) Pr. George's man paid \$7.5 million, lawyer said," *Washington Post*, July 20, 2011.