

Lawyer: Crossbow killing a failure of mental health system

October 3 2017, by Michael Rubinkam

Lisa Caplan had bounced in and out of mental health facilities, moving back home with her 71-year-old mother after her latest psychiatric stay ended in May. Neighbors say Caplan behaved strangely, carrying a shovel around the neighborhood and knocking on doors at odd hours.

Last week, according to police, she detoured into deadly violence.

Caplan picked up a crossbow, shot her mother twice and went to bed, a police affidavit said. Authorities were called to the home for a welfare check two days later and found Sandra Barndt's body under a blanket, an arrow protruding from her head and neck area.

Caplan's lawyer, Jon Ostroff, blames a "failed mental health system" for what he called a preventable death. He said Caplan has lived with schizophrenia for two decades.

"The tragedy is that she was able to be released against her family's wishes repeatedly," Ostroff, who was hired by one of Caplan's children, told The Associated Press.

Caplan, 51, was charged with homicide. She remains locked up in Carbon County, about 80 miles (129 kilometers) north of Philadelphia.

Chad Steskal, Barndt's son, had wanted his mother to move to Florida so he could care for her. He said she had spent her life caring for others, including Caplan.

"I wanted her to free herself of the burden of looking after my sister," Steskal said. "But she couldn't abandon her daughter."

It's yet to be determined whether, or how, Caplan's [mental health](#) played a role in the killing. Experts say people with [mental illness](#), absent other risk factors like substance abuse, are no more violent than the rest of the population.

Ostroff demanded a psychiatric evaluation. He accused officials of dragging their feet.

"Given the nature of mental illness and the way it ebbs and flows, if she's not given an immediate psychiatric assessment while she's in the custody of the prison, for every hour they wait, they're threatening her constitutional right to a defense," he said.

Officials at the county jail declined to comment. District Attorney Jean Engler declined comment on the specifics of the case, citing ethical constraints, but said Caplan "will be afforded all the protections of the legal system." Ostroff, who is representing Caplan temporarily until a public defender can be appointed, said Tuesday that Engler told him the public defender will need to petition the court.

Police were familiar with Caplan. She had convictions for identity theft and for lying to authorities in a gun case. Ostroff said Caplan had a history of violent behavior, and police had previously committed her to psychiatric facilities.

"The police have played an active role in having her institutionalized," he said. "Why she was released is a mystery other than it is a symptom of the problem."

Caplan told state police she had been arguing with her mother last

Wednesday at their home in Palmerton, went upstairs to get the crossbow, loaded it, returned to the living room and shot Barndt in the neck as the older woman sat on the couch, according to the affidavit. Caplan said she went back upstairs, reloaded and shot Barndt in the face, the affidavit said.

Ostroff questioned whether Caplan was capable of waiving her right against self-incrimination, given questions about her mental state.

Steskal, Barndt's son, said Barndt had "concerns" about her daughter, but didn't appear to be afraid.

"I don't believe my mom was afraid my sister would hurt her. She never expressed to me that she thought my sister was a danger to her, physically," Steskal said.

Yet Barndt, who had managed group homes before her retirement a year ago, was apparently contemplating a change. Steskal said she was supposed to meet with a real estate agent on Friday, the day [police](#) discovered her body.

"She's giving to a fault," Steskal, his voice breaking, said of his mother. "So giving that she sacrificed everything for her children and, ultimately, her own life."

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