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Electrocuted woman's family gets millions



JOHN DAVENPORT/STAFF

Juror Greg Moore hugs Sylvia Estrada on Wednesday after a jury awarded her \$303,000 for being shocked when she touched Betty Jean Sanchez, who was killed.

Two contractors, CPS and DOT held responsible for 1999 death near UTSA Downtown Campus.

BY KATE HUNGER
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

Betty Jean Sanchez was walking to work on a winter morning two years ago when she was electrocuted.

On Wednesday, a Bexar County jury awarded her two children almost \$7.6 million after finding two contractors, City Public Ser-

vice and the Texas Department of Transportation responsible for her death.

The jury also awarded \$303,000 to Sylvia Estrada, a co-worker who was shocked when she touched Sanchez.

How much of the damages each defendant is to shoulder will be determined at a hearing to be held in a few weeks.

According to court records, CPS and the Transportation Department settled with Sanchez's children for \$2.5 million and \$8,000, respectively.

Estrada's lawyers said their client received \$7,000 from CPS and \$1,000 from the Trans-

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portation Department.

District Judge David Peeples ruled these settlements will be subtracted from the jury's verdict.

Sanchez, 43, was electrocuted Jan. 7, 1999, while walking to her job as a custodian at the UTSA Downtown Campus.

The source of the electric current came from a concrete box below the sidewalk that was covered by a cast-iron lid, said Harry Bates, an attorney for the Sanchez family.

The box contained spliced wires that powered the lighting system along the elevated portion of nearby Interstate 35. The insulation on a wire was worn and the wire was touching the metal lid, he said, adding that the lid hadn't been grounded and became electrically charged.

An electrical engineer testified that Sanchez lost control of her muscles when she walked into an electrical field on the sidewalk at Durango Boulevard and Pecos la Trinidad. She then fell on the metal lid.

In its unanimous verdict, the jury in 224th District Court split the blame among four of five defendants.

Mica Corp., which the plaintiffs alleged improperly installed a box containing wiring for a lighting system, shouldered 50 percent of the blame in the verdict.

The jury found M&M Contracting of Texas Inc., the demolition subcontractor hired to tear up the sidewalk during the UTSA Downtown Campus pro-

ject, responsible for 30 percent of the damages. M&M was hired by Spaw-Glass Contractors Inc. The plaintiffs claimed M&M workers lowered the box, bringing the metal lid closer to the wires.

The jury found CPS 15 percent responsible, and the Transportation Department 5 percent responsible.

Jurors found no fault against Spaw-Glass, the general contractor on the UTSA project.

The verdict came 2½ years after 16-year-old Christine Sanchez lost her mother, a woman who raised two children by herself and volunteered at the Raul Jimenez Thanksgiving Dinner.

"I'm happy it's over," she said of the trial.

She stood with red eyes next to her 20-year-old brother. A pendant on her purple blouse read "God bless Mom."

The two-week trial delved into the history of construction projects in the area around the box, dating to the mid-1980s. The Sanchezes' lawyers faulted several contractors that worked on three projects near the box over the years.

Mica attorney Richard Weinstein said Mica didn't install the box. He called the verdict devastating, and said the work was done so long ago it was hard to disprove the allegations.

M&M attorney Ross Pringle Jr. called the verdict disappointing.

"We worked around (the box) — didn't touch it, didn't open it," he said.

CPS was sued because it had an agreement with the city to maintain the box and should

have noticed the problem, Bates said.

He said the Transportation Department owns the equipment and was sued because it hired Mica. But in his closing arguments Tuesday, Bates had urged the jury to place 90 percent of the blame on Mica and none on CPS or the Transportation Department.

"We felt like the jury considered all the evidence and found the appropriate parties responsible," Bates said.

CPS attorney Richard Danysh declined to discuss the case, citing a confidentiality agreement. But he said had there been a complaint, CPS would have addressed the problem. He said the box has been disabled.

In addition to the \$8,000 settlement with Sanchez's children, the Transportation Department agreed to pay \$1,000 each to Estrada and another person who claimed to be shocked when they touched Sanchez, spokeswoman Ximena Copa-Wiggins said.

Tom Hall, another lawyer for the Sanchezes, had urged jurors to deliver a colossal verdict.

"If it hadn't happened to Betty Jean Sanchez, it would have happened to someone else," he told jurors Tuesday.

Sanchez's son and daughter stood quietly outside the courtroom after the verdict. They urged other children to cherish their parents knowing their time together could be cut short.

"Take care of your parents," Edward Sanchez said. "Always say you love them."

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