

New Law May Clear Way For Second Autopsy In Cold Case

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. - A new state law could bring prosecutors one step closer to finding answers in a 15-year-old cold case.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam recently signed legislation that had been pushed by a local district attorney. The DA had re-opened the investigation into 15-month-old Jeffrey Kelton Skaggs' death.

NewsChannel 5 Investigates first raised questions about it more than a decade ago.

"It's a good thing for the truth to come out," said veteran Nashville attorney David Raybin.

The new law, which took effect on July 1st, clears up concerns about whether the DA even has the right to ask for a second autopsy.

For months, the local DA's request to exhume the body buried in a Hickman County cemetery has been clouded by legal uncertainty -- uncertainty that Raybin said has been erased by the new law.

"I don't think this law is going to promote hundreds of more exhumations, but what it will do is bring justice to a case that has quite literally been buried," Raybin said.

Jeffrey Kelton Skaggs suffered a fatal blow to the head inside a Maury County trailer in 2001. Medical examiner Dr. Charles Harlan, who later lost his license for incompetence, ruled it an accident.

But our investigation discovered that other experts disagreed.

"We had injuries that did not match the stories, the multiple stories provided," said former State Medical Examiner Dr. Bruce Levy.

The Tennessee State Medical Board shared that concern, as did retired Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Director Larry Wallace.

"The child's actual manner of death was the result of non-accidental trauma," Wallace read from the Medical Board's findings.

NewsChannel 5 Investigates asked, "Meaning?"

"Meaning that in the judgment of the authors of this article it was a homicide," he answered. "Murder?" we asked.

"It was murder," he agreed.

The DA at the time, Mike Bottoms, refused to order a second autopsy.

"So what about this little boy? What if you're wrong, sir?" *NewsChannel 5 Investigates* had asked, drawing a shrug from Bottoms.

But Bottoms' successor came to a different conclusion after reviewing *NewsChannel 5's* investigation and doing his own digging.

"The more we looked at it, the deeper we got into it, the more we realized this is a homicide investigation," Cooper said.

Cooper agreed last year to re-open the case, but Kelton's mom refused to go along with a second autopsy.

And the DA discovered that -- because the boy was pronounced dead in an Alabama hospital, then buried in another county -- the laws might not allow him to exhume the body.

Raybin said, "The law was antiquated because most people died in the county where they were killed."

But with the new law, Raybin believes a judge will eventually allow justice for Jeffrey Kelton Skaggs.

"What possible reason could you have in not taking a second look at something like that? If it was a homicide, the killer could still be loose and harming someone else."

Cooper has asked a Maury County judge to order that second autopsy.

So far, no hearing has been scheduled.

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