

MontCo settles with family of boy paralyzed by speeding police officer

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Montgomery County will pay \$400,000 to the family of a Clarksburg boy who was paralyzed by an off-duty police officer driving more than 25 miles per hour over the speed limit.

With the boy never expected to walk again, the family is bracing for millions of dollars more in medical costs -- while the officer involved in the crash remains a member of the county's police force.

In April 2008, off-duty Officer Jason Cokinos struck 12-year-old Luis Jovel Jr. with his police cruiser as the boy crossed the street in front of his home on Stringtown Road. In a follow-up report, police determined that Cokinos was driving 56 miles per hour in a 30 mph zone and concluded that the boy would not have been hit if the officer were traveling at the speed limit.

The family originally sought millions of dollars from the county and Cokinos, but was entitled to just \$200,000 per case, under state law limiting liability for local governments.

The county agreed to pay twice that amount, but the family is far from satisfied.

"It wasn't fair," said the boy's mother, Norma Jovel -- who quit her job to watch Luis full time. "This was the most horrible thing that ever happened to us. It's a long process, and this money will only cover so much. We're not happy with it, but we were scared we wouldn't get anything."

Luis, now a quadriplegic, has permanent brain injury and difficulty speaking. The freshman at Clarksburg High School requires around-the-clock medical care for tasks as small as turning or getting ready in the morning. Norma said her husband, Luis Jovel Sr., works as a manager at McDonald's and doesn't earn nearly enough money to cover their son's expenses.

Montgomery County police spokesman Paul Starks said Cokinos is a uniformed officer in the police community action team. He would not comment on whether Cokinos faced disciplinary action, calling it a personnel matter. Cokinos received two traffic citations for the accident.

When Cokinos' car made impact, Jovel was thrown onto the hood and carried before being thrown down the road. Cokinos testified that he was traveling to his part-time job directing traffic at the Mirant power plant in Dickerson.

"His life will never be the same," Norma said of the teenager, who used to play football and soccer as well as a variety of musical instruments. "We're still not totally used to it."