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Los Angeles Times

Death of Man in Police Custody Is Ruled a Homicide by L.A. Coroner

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The Los Angeles County coroner's office has ruled the death of a man in the custody of El Monte police in October a homicide.

Frank Tranquilino, 31, died Oct. 24 after police said he fought with several officers, then lost consciousness after he had been handcuffed.

Tranquilino was walking in the 3300 block of Maxson Road when he attracted the attention of police, who suspected he was carrying narcotics. He sprinted down the street and climbed over several chain-link fences before being grabbed by an officer, police said.

At the time of Tranquilino's death, El Monte's then-police chief, Bill Ankeny, said that police had used a control hold to restrain the man.

Coroner's spokesman David Campbell said the office ruled that Tranquilino's death resulted from the combined effects of neck com-

pression and cocaine and methamphetamine intoxication.

John Sweeney, a lawyer representing Tranquilino's 15-year-old son, Rudy, said Wednesday that he believed the report suggested that a chokehold had been used. An independent pathologist he had hired, he said, "concluded that the death was due to asphyxia, probably a chokehold."

The coroner's report does not use the word chokehold to describe how the Tranquilino was restrained.

"Clearly, the El Monte Police Department killed this man," Sweeney said. "They denied it. It took the coroner's report to verify what we knew all along. The family is very distraught, and this young man has to be raised without his father. We are going to make sure that this young man is well taken care of through compensation by the city of El Monte."

Pete Ferguson, an attorney representing El Monte, disagreed with that assessment, pointing out

that the coroner had found high levels of cocaine and methamphetamines in Tranquilino's blood. "Minimal force was applied," Ferguson said. "If the guy didn't take drugs, he'd be alive today and would be sitting in jail for assaulting and battering police officers."

The Police Department had no comment.

Lawyer Stephen Yagman filed suit in October on behalf of parents Sergio Tranquilino and Rosemarie Richardson, seeking \$20 million in general and punitive damages, plus attorney's fees and injunctive relief, as well as an additional \$10 million under a Racketeering Influence and Corrupt Organization claim.

Yagman was unavailable for comment Wednesday, but charged in October that the El Monte police were lying about what happened in the incident.

"They said that, all of a sudden, he stopped breathing," Yagman said. "He stopped breathing because they were choking him."