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High Levels Of Meth Found in 2 Crash Dead

Car carrying four drove past crossing gates in July, was hit by Amtrak train.

By EVA KIS
The Ledger

LAKELAND | At least two of the four young adults killed when a train struck a car in July had significant doses of methamphetamine in their bodies, according to the Polk Medical Examiner's Office.

Toxicology reports show that 22-year-old Brian P. Guy's blood contained 3,200 nanograms of methamphetamine per milliliter, while Brittany N. Stickney, 18, tested at 1,500 ng/mL.

Both quantities are multiple times the minimum amount the federal government considers a positive result for the drug.

Guy and Stickney, along with Whitney Pressnell, 20, and Cecerra Benafield, 20, were riding in a Pontiac Grand Am north on Wabash Avenue in Lakeland on the afternoon of July 16.

When they came to the railroad crossing at Olive Street, the crossing bars had come down in advance of a New York-bound Amtrak train.

The driver, whom Lakeland police have not named, passed another vehicle and drove around the crossing arm, but could not beat the train.

All four were ejected and died at the scene.

Toxicology results for Pressnell and Benafield have not yet been received by the Medical Examiner.

lawsuit filed

Pressnell's family has sued Benafield's estate, claiming she was behind the wheel at the time of the crash.

Despite the evidence of methamphetamine use in at least two of the vehicle's occupants, there is no state statute comparable to the .08 standard for drunk driving when it comes to drugs, according to LPD Sgt. Hans Lehman.

A positive result for meth, as established by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is 500 ng/mL, the benchmark used by law enforcement officials when evaluating for DUI.

Additionally, Florida is not among the 12 states with a "per se" law that considers impaired a driver with any amount of illegal substance in his body.

As a guideline, LPD uses the federal substance abuse administration thresholds for positive drug results combined with the observations of the officer at the scene to establish grounds for a DUI offense.

"What we do, if we have urine or blood that comes back with drugs on board, we look at the total investigation," Lehman said.

With a case where those involved in an accident are killed, police try to find evidence of impaired driving before the crash.

But a positive drug result alone means there is "a very good chance that you are impaired," Lehman said.

The minimum threshold distinguishes between direct use of a drug and mere exposure to a substance that could cause a positive test for a controlled drug - such as poppy seeds resulting in a positive test for opiates.

sale regulated

For methamphetamine, that substance is ephedrine, a common ingredient in some medicines intended to treat cold and flu symptoms.

Ephedrine has since come under strict regulation for its role in the manufacture of meth, and products containing it were placed behind the counter in stores in July 2005.

Dr. Stephen Nelson conducted the autopsies in July, but toxicology results normally take upward of 90 days to be processed.

Nelson was out of the office and could not be reached for comment Friday.

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Cecerra Benafield, Brian P. Guy, Whitney Pressnell and Brittany N. Stickney
