



News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FAMILY FILES SUIT AGAINST SPRING ARBOR OF WILMINGTON AND PARENT COMPANY HHHUNT FOLLOWING GARLAND GARRETT'S BEATING DEATH

Wilmington, NC—Former North Carolina Secretary of Transportation Garland Garrett was 80 years old and battling dementia but otherwise in good health when he was severely beaten while asleep in his bed on September 6, 2020. He died six days later from injuries sustained in the beating.

His attacker, Thomas Gunter, was a fellow resident in the memory care unit of Spring Arbor of Wilmington. Mr. Gunter had a long and well-documented history of increasingly erratic and violent behavior at Spring Arbor, including more than 25 incidents in the three months leading up to the beating of Garland Garrett. These incidents included repeated assaults on staff and other patients, kicking walls and doors, throwing chairs and trash cans. (*See pages 15-17 in the attached Complaint filed this morning in the Superior Court of New Hanover County.*)

“Garland Garrett’s death was a tragedy – a preventable tragedy,” said Jim Lea, an attorney with the Lea/Schultz Law Firm, P.C., and a leader of the team representing Garland Garrett’s widow and sons. “His loved ones trusted Spring Arbor to protect Garland, and they violated that trust.”

Staff at Spring Arbor of Wilmington brought concerns about Mr. Gunter to the attention of management of the facility. But Mr. Gunter was not discharged from the facility and no other steps were taken to protect either residents or staff of Spring Arbor.

Rather, Spring Arbor swept the staff’s concerns under the rug. The families of these very vulnerable elderly residents knew nothing of what was going on. Because of COVID-19, their visits to the facility and access to the memory unit were constrained.

Now, in what is perhaps the most troubling part of the story of Garland Garrett's tragic death, Spring Arbor of Wilmington and its parent company HHHunt want to hide behind the COVID-19 "Emergency or Disaster Treatment Act" to deny responsibility. The Emergency Act, passed and signed into law in the Spring of 2020, provides protection from liability for health care services directly or indirectly impacted by decisions made as a result of COVID-19.

"This is not what our General Assembly had in mind when it passed the Emergency Act," said Joel Rhine, of Rhine Law Firm, P.C. "The Emergency Act was not intended to allow an 80-year-old man to be beaten to death in his nursing home bed."

HHHunt owns two dozen senior care facilities under its Spring Arbor umbrella in North Carolina and across the Southeast, as well as apartment complexes, planned communities and subdivisions. See <https://www.hhhunt.com/>

The family and former Secretary of State Rufus Edmisten participated in a video to provide background and context. See [Garland Garrett Story](#) with permission for reuse by Orange St Films.



Audio of 911 Call:

[911 Call](#)

Video:

(with permission to edit from Orange St. Films and Garrett family)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIFeOBMaTxY>

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