



## **Carpet Cleaner Murders Woman (1998)**

### **Incident Summary**

On May 5, 1998 in Oakland California, an employee of a carpet cleaning company that she had hired murdered Doctor Kerry Spooner-Dean in her home. The doctor had responded to a \$5.99-per-room carpet cleaning advertisement that looked like it was from a professional, reputable company. The company, America's Best Carpet Care, sent contractor Jerrol Glen Woods to clean her carpets. Mr. Woods was at her home on more than one occasion returning to treat problem spots. Reports suggest that the last Woods was at her home the two had an argument about his work that resulted in the doctor's tragic death. Woods apparently snapped and choked and stabbed her with two knives that he had found in her kitchen. He also stole money and credit cards from her purse. Investigators located Woods by tracing him to the use of the doctor's credit cards. Woods and his wife, Tamika, had been using the cards to buy gas, food, and clothes.

Mr. Woods was from Vallejo, California and in his 50s at the time of the murder. At the time of the murder, Mr. Woods had a long history of violent crimes dating back to the 1970s. His crimes started as low level thefts and robberies, but quickly progressed into more serious matters, usually involving violence. He had been sentenced to 17 years in federal prison in 1986 for robbing a Savings & Loan in Reno, Nevada. He was released on probation after 10 years in prison, in 1996. When America's Best Carpet Care hired him, he was a parolee with eight convictions for violent felonies.

America's Best Carpet Care never conducted a background screening investigation prior to hiring Woods as a contractor. Had they conducted a background investigation on Woods, they would have found out about his eight Felony convictions and his propensity to violence. At that time many service companies including other smaller carpet cleaning companies, considered it standard practice to conduct background investigations on new employees and sub-contractors who entered people's homes. Unfortunately in this case, this simple business practice was not followed and had it been filed, it may well have prevented Woods from having such easy access to the doctor's home and very well could have saved her life.

### **Court Decisions**

In August 1998, Woods was found guilty of murder and was sentenced to life in prison without parole. The doctor's husband, Daniel Dean filed a lawsuit for negligence against Americas Best Carpet Care. In 2000 after a civil jury trial, Daniel Dean was awarded a settlement of \$11.22 million dollars. The jury found that America's Best Carpet Care, who had subcontracted Woods for the job, was negligent in their failure to conduct a proper background investigation on Woods before sending him to the doctors home. This incident and the resulting settlement eventually forced America's Best Carpet Care to go out of business

## **Lessons Learned**

The risks of negligent hiring are clearly demonstrated in this case. Courts have repeatedly found that they will hold employers responsible for the actions of their employees if their employees hurt someone and it is discovered that the employer did not properly conduct a proper background investigations on the employee.

The onus is on the employer to demonstrate that they exercised due care in ensuring that their new hire did not have something in his/her background that would indicate that they were not suitable for the job. If the employer made a legitimate, reasonable and prudent attempt to screen an employee and that employee's actions resulted in a negligence claim against the employer, the employers would have a much greater chance of successfully defending themselves against a negligent hiring lawsuit. According to HR Magazine, the average settlement of a negligent hiring lawsuit is nearly \$1 Million dollars.

## **MSA Investigations**

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