

DHHS; No Errors in Three Boone Motel Deaths

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The first determination has been handed down in the deaths of three people at the Boone Best Western Hotel, that with the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services issuing a determination that no state employees “erred” in the events surrounding three carbon monoxide deaths. The Charlotte Observer quotes state spokesman Ricky Diaz from an email that, “The department’s direct involvement in investigating the deaths in Boone was limited to processing the specimens submitted to the State Toxicology Lab for analysis,” and said, “Based on our review of the facts, we do not believe that any state employee erred in performing their responsibilities.” DHHS Secretary Aldona Wos said back in June that deaths “should have never happened” and vowed to make changes. The finding comes as a measure that would require hotels and motels in the state to have carbon monoxide detectors is on the Governor’s desk for approval in a bill with a wide range of regulatory changes. But The Observer says that its investigation has uncovered a series of investigative missteps by multiple local and state agencies, including the N.C. medical examiner’s office, which is part of DHHS. Fire officials admit they did not test the hotel for carbon monoxide after the first two deaths occurred in April, but that the room had been ventilated at the time. Watauga County Medical Examiner Dr. Brent Hall did not visit the death scene when the first deaths occurred, even though experts say it is a crucial first step in determining how a person died, according to the paper, which said documents show Hall wrongly suspected that a drug overdose might have caused those deaths. The Observer’s article says officials took about six weeks to produce the toxicology tests results for the Jenkinsons that experts told them could be completed in less than 20 minutes. On June 1, the state medical examiner’s office learned that Shirley Jenkins had a lethal level of carbon monoxide in her blood when she died at the Best Western, but the office did not alert local police, fire or health officials until after 11-year-old Jeffrey Williams of Rock Hill was found dead in the same room on June 8. The medical examiner’s office didn’t finish the toxicology report for Daryl Jenkins until June 9, the day after the boy died.