

TAINED DRYWALL**Fort Bragg Infant Death Toll May Climb to Twelve**

Another baby has died in military housing at Fort Bragg. Now investigators are examining the house for tainted drywall and other possible contaminants.

by Joaquin Sapien, March 8, 2011, 9:31 p.m. EST



March 9, 2011: This article has been corrected.

A 12th infant apparently has died of undetermined causes in military housing at Fort Bragg, N.C., and investigators are now trying to determine whether the death is linked to fumes from contaminated drywall or some other environmental problem in the home.

Last month, federal officials declared that 11 earlier infant deaths were not caused by environmental contaminants, but they did not suggest any alternative causes.

Four-and-a-half-month-old Jaxson Garza died on Feb. 24. His parents, Sgt. Armando Garza and his wife Brittany, both 26, were moved to a guest house on the base later that day. Brittany Garza later learned that her home was being tested for defective drywall and other environmental problems.

The Garzas, who have three other children, are still waiting for the final results of Jaxson's autopsy. Brittany Garza said she recently spoke with the pathologist from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Rockville, Md., who performed the autopsy. She said he told her that, so far, he hadn't been able to find a cause for Jaxson's death.

"He said there is no external trauma. He [Jaxson] appeared to be a healthy baby and he didn't expect to find any internal trauma," Brittany Garza said.

An AFIP spokesman said the institute wouldn't comment on a pending autopsy.

Ben Abel, a spokesman for Fort Bragg, said Jaxson's autopsy will be factored into the military's investigation of the infant deaths.

"As was stated all along throughout the entirety of this process ... housing here is safe," Abel said. "Our concern right now is that the Garza family is well cared for."

Chris Grey, a spokesman for the Army's Criminal Investigation Command, known as CID, said that at this point Jaxson's death is being investigated independent of the other infant death investigations at Fort Bragg.

“Of course CID is looking at this death very closely to determine if there are any similarities with the other undetermined death cases,” Grey said. “At this time we have no information or evidence to link this death to any other infant deaths, nor do we have any information or evidence that the other deaths under review are linked to any environmental cause.”

Ft. Bragg's Garrison Commander, Col. Stephen J. Sicinski, said he is confident that the homes are safe. He suggested that the deaths could have been caused by factors that neither the military, nor the CPSC can control.

“There could be many, many things that affect the lifestyle of the family and the conditions of the home that aren't part of the structure,” Sicinski said. “If you follow what I'm saying, there are a lot of things that can go into the general welfare and the health of children in a home in a family environment that we cannot affect and we will not affect, we are not going to be the thought police. This is America--everybody has a right to privacy.”

Three Deaths in a Single House

The first unexplained infant death at Fort Bragg occurred in February 2007. Three children from three different families died in a single home.

David M. Abramson, a professor at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and director of research for the National Center for Disaster Preparedness, said that such a situation is extremely unusual.

“The odds of three babies dying in a short order in the same house without an underlying condition of some sort, it's very unlikely. It's enormously unlikely,” Abramson said. “Common sense would dictate there's something common in the environmental exposure.”

The Consumer Product Safety Commission, the lead agency in the federal government's two-year investigation of tainted drywall, has examined the 11 infant deaths and last month ruled out environmental causes. But the CPSC's investigation has been criticized by drywall experts, who say that the test the agency used—known as an elemental sulfur test—doesn't actually measure the amount of sulfur gasses coming off the board. They said that another test, known as a chamber test, should have been used.

“The idea that they are skating around this and not doing the obvious measurement is very troubling,” Michael Shaw, vice president of Interscan Corp. and a member of a voluntary standards committee for drywall manufacturers told ProPublica and the Sarasota Herald-Tribune last month after the CPSC study was released. “If you want to see what's wrong with the drywall, you test the drywall. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to appreciate that when you're trying to address how much the drywall is off-gassing.”

Parents of the deceased infants don't understand why the CPSC didn't use the more reliable test, or why the agency tested samples from only two of the homes where the deaths occurred.

“I felt betrayed, honestly. I trusted the CPSC as an independent agency to bring the truth out and clearly that didn't happen” said Spc. Nathanael Duke, whose son, Gabriel, died in March 2010. “Anybody with experience with Chinese or tainted American drywall knows from the way they tested the board that they are worried about something. They still refuse to do any chamber testing and as far as I know that is the only thing that could confirm or deny the presence of problem drywall.”

'The Nightmare Just Got Worse'

The Garzas said they had problems with mold and leaks in and outside their home soon after they moved into it in February 2010. For help, they called Picerne Military Housing, the private company that builds and maintains housing at Fort Bragg.

“I complained about what turned out to be mold on the outside of the house the day we did our walk-through, and Picerne assured me that it would be cleaned up after we moved in,” Brittany Garza said. The mold was never removed, she said.

Picerne directed questions to Ft. Bragg's public affairs office.

The Garzas didn't notice any corrosion on the copper wiring on their house, which is the most obvious sign of defective drywall. But Brittany Garza said that while she was pregnant with Jaxson she fainted several times and often had a bloody nose, problems that have been linked to exposure to defective drywall. She said she didn't have those problems during her earlier pregnancies.

Garza said that just before Jaxson was born in October 2010, the icemaker in their refrigerator began to leak and water poured into their living room. Picerne fixed the leak immediately and a couple of days later a contractor arrived to dry out the carpet with a fan.

In February, the water heater broke, and the maintenance crew that arrived to fix it spilled water in the hallway and on the living room floor. Some of the water seeped into the walls and into the kitchen, Garza said.

The Garzas called Picerne several times, saying they were worried about mold and the health of their children. A maintenance crew arrived a week later, and on Feb. 23 lifted the carpet and placed a fan over it to dry it out, Brittany Garza said.

The next morning, she woke up at 7 o'clock and checked on Jaxson. She said he was already awake, so she fed him and placed him in his bouncy chair. Then she went downstairs to get eight-year old Maddison ready for school.

When she went back upstairs to check on Jaxson, just before 8 a.m., she said he wasn't moving. She called the paramedics and began giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. When the paramedics arrived they began trying to revive Jaxson, while Garza called her husband.

Instead of being taken to the hospital with their son, the Garzas were interviewed at their home by CID investigators. Two hours later they were taken to the hospital where they held Jaxson one last time.

"Then the nightmare just got worse," Garza said.

When the Garzas were taken back to their house, the CID investigators told them to gather enough of their possessions to last a few days, because they would be staying at a guesthouse that Picerne had set up for them. Before they could leave, however, an official with Cumberland County's Child Protective Services arrived at their house.

"They told us that North Carolina law says they have to remove the children from the premises until my husband and I have been cleared for any wrongdoing because a child died in the house and we don't know why yet," Garza said.

The Garzas' three remaining children stayed with family friends for four days. They're now back with their parents at the guesthouse where the family is still staying.

Brittany Garza said she doesn't want to live on the base any more, but she worries that moving will be too expensive.

"I don't know what to do, because I want to keep my other kids safe," she said.

Correction, March 9, 2011: An earlier version of this article stated that Chris Grey was a spokesman for Fort Bragg's Criminal Investigation Command. He is actually the spokesman for the Army's Criminal investigation Command.



Joaquin Sapien

Joaquin Sapien is a reporter at ProPublica covering criminal justice and social services.

✉ joaquin.sapien@propublica.org 🐦 @jbsapien

📞 Signal: 347-573-3042