

Family: New autopsy shows body found in tote was strangled

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The family of a woman whose frozen, naked body was found inside a garbage can last year said Monday that a new autopsy suggests she was strangled, contradicting an earlier finding that she died accidentally from drugs.

Now relatives of Amanda Wienckowski — unconvinced the police are doing enough to piece together the 20-year-old's final hours — are pressing police and the Erie County medical examiner to release materials from the investigation so they can pursue answers on their own.

“She was murdered. There’s no question in my mind,” said Dennis Delano, a former Buffalo homicide and cold case detective who is working unpaid with the woman’s family to find out who was responsible for Wienckowski’s January 2009 death. “One of the biggest clues is that she was upside down in a garbage tote with her hair cut.”

Wienckowski’s body was found in the tote next to a Buffalo church last January, across the street from where she was last seen alive a month earlier. She had a history of drug use and had worked as a prostitute, authorities have said.

The Erie County medical examiner’s office listed the cause of death as an accidental overdose of morphine and codeine following its January 2009 autopsy. The “date rape” drug GHB also was in her system.

While preliminary findings from a second autopsy commissioned by the family this past March note bruising and finger marks around her neck, Dr. Silvia Comparini will not commit to a cause of death until she has examined tissue and organs that were missing from Wienckowski’s body when it was exhumed and shipped to her in Los Angeles.

Attorney Steven Cohen is seeking a state Supreme Court order to compel the Erie County medical examiner to release the missing parts, including a neck bone and part of the heart that were removed during the original autopsy. The lawyer also wants the Buffalo police to be made to release the department’s reports and crime scene photos to the family. Justice Gerald Whalen is expected to consider the request May 17.

Buffalo police have cited the ongoing investigation as their reason for refusing to release details in the case.

“It remains under investigation by homicide detectives,” spokesman Michael DeGeorge said Monday. He declined to say whether the case was being investigated as a homicide or accidental death or to comment on the second autopsy.

Wienckowski’s mother, Leslie Fink, said she has believed from the start her daughter was murdered.

“I know my daughter wouldn’t do this to herself,” she said at Cohen’s office Monday.

Wienckowski was last seen alive when her roommate dropped her off at a home in the 100 block of Spring Street on the night of Dec. 5, 2009. Her family said she had left a shift as a bartender at Cocktail Bob’s in the Falls earlier in the evening.

Her roommate told police investigators that he was waiting for her in his car when he received a text message telling him that she would be longer than she expected.

The roommate told investigators he couldn’t wait for Wienckowski and left to return to their apartment in Lewiston. When he failed to hear from Wienckowski after two days, he went to her family. Her mother reported her missing Dec. 7.