



Editorial: 500 days -- a clear sign of serious dysfunction

Public Opinion Online

We assume that at some point, perhaps not too far down the road, Pennsylvania State Police will come clean with Franklin County about what exactly has roadblocked an analysis of evidence in the July 2008 death of Don Berkebile.

It's been nearly 500 days since the 81-year-old Berkebile and a neighbor about half his age, Bryan Kendall, got into an early morning fight that led to the head and neck injuries that caused the elder man's death.

Franklin County Coroner Jeff Conner ruled the incident a homicide, a legal term that only indicates one person died at the hands of another. Kendall has not been charged with any crime.

But the context of that homicide remains unknown, at least publicly. Local prosecutors say they're still waiting for a state police crime lab to process evidence that will lead them to a decision on whether or not to file charges.

Police ain't talking. Prosecutors won't describe the evidence, continue to point their fingers at police.

In America, people should not have to wait 18

months -- and counting -- for justice or redemption, especially when it comes to homicides.

The people involved -- Kendall and his family, Berkebile's friends and family -- deserve closure on this phase of the investigation. We're starting to suspect that we're dealing with a shameful breakdown in our justice system.

Did police lose the evidence, compromise it in some way? Is there no way, based on that evidence, to objectively reconstruct what happened that fateful morning? We don't know, and official sources have circled the wagons.

Perhaps they think people will simply forget about this case, and perhaps many have.

But we won't.

And we think 500 days represents a tipping point, a clear indication that the time has come for a higher authority than state police to shake loose some answers.

-- By Matthew Major, opinion page editor and member of Public Opinion's editorial board

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