



Georgia officials refuse to pay medical bills of toddler hurt in SWAT raid

Stun grenade struck 19-month-old baby during no-knock raid, leaving family with hundreds of thousands in expenses

By Renee Lewis
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Officials in Habersham County, Georgia, have said they will not pay the medical bills of a toddler seriously injured when a flash grenade exploded in his face during a SWAT raid in May, local media has reported.

The child, Bounkham Phonesavanh, then 19 months old, was struck with the weapon when the county's SWAT police conducted a so-called "no-knock" raid on a home in the early hours of May 28, throwing a flash grenade into the baby's crib. The devices – also known as flash bangs and stun grenades – are often deployed in raids and protests to temporarily disorient suspects.

Police said the raid was in response to claims by an informant that drugs were purchased at the property, in which Phonesavanh's family was staying temporarily at the time. No drugs were found at the home, a local CBS affiliate reported.

Phonesavanh was put into a medically induced coma and treated in the Grady Memorial Hospital burn unit because of the injuries. He was hospitalized for five weeks for injuries to his face and third-degree burns to his chest, according to CBS.

Officials from Habersham County initially said they would help to pay the medical bills, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, but on Monday said it would be illegal for them to do so, local news station WSBTV reported.

"The question before the board was whether it is legally permitted to pay these expenses. After consideration of this question following advice of counsel, the board of commissioners has concluded that it would be in violation of the law for it to do so," a statement by Habersham County's attorney said, according to WSBTV.

The incident sparked controversy over what critics say is an increasing militarization of police forces – and the growing use of SWAT or tactical teams to apprehend nonviolent suspects. Such teams in the past have been utilized in volatile, high-risk situations, experts have said, such as hostage situations or armed bank robberies.

In the early 1980s, there were just 3,000 SWAT deployments nationwide annually, according to a report called "Overkill: The Rise of Paramilitary Police Raids in America" by the CATO institute, a public policy research organization. By 1996, that number had grown to 30,000 and by 2001 SWAT teams were deployed 40,000 times. With the growing use of SWAT teams, the report said, the number of botched raids and individuals injured has also increased.