



Bulletproof vests under scrutiny

Company denies knowing product was defective

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One policeman was shot dead and another seriously injured after bullets penetrated supposedly bulletproof vests they were wearing in 2003. Now NBC News has exclusive videotape suggesting the Michigan-based vest company — Second Chance Body Armor — may have known its product was defective before the shootings.

"A lot of people think I'm kind of stupid for doing this," says company president Richard Davis before shooting himself to demonstrate how well Second Chance's bullet-resistant vests work.

But last year, two police officers wearing Second Chance vests were not as fortunate. Bullets penetrated their vests — seriously wounding Ed Limbacher in Pennsylvania and killing Tony Zeppetella in California.

Now Zeppetella's widow is suing the company.

"I think they knew their product was faulty and they chose still to sell it to officers around the country and around the world, and as a result of that, Tony died," says Jamie Zeppetella.

Now, in a videotaped deposition obtained by NBC News, a top Second Chance research official says his firm did know — almost two years before the shootings — that vests could be deteriorating and might fail. But the company did not tell the public.

"I strongly believed that this was a threat, and that some police officer could be killed," says Aaron Westrick on the deposition tape.

In a December 2001 memo, Westrick urges that customers be warned, saying "lives and our credibility are at stake" and advising the company not to "continue operating as though nothing is wrong until one of our customers is killed."

And in a draft letter to the company's board in 2002, president Davis wrote that one undesirable option was to, "continue operating as though nothing is wrong until one of our customers is killed or wounded."

Davis now offers the following explanation for the letter.

"I had to write a very nasty letter to my own board of directors and really get them off their butts and force them into doing something," he says. "I said, 'my God, don't wait until somebody gets killed!'"

The company did continue tests, but did not warn the public.

After the police officers were shot, a National Institute of Justice test found Limbacher's vest had degraded by 30 percent.

Yet, Second Chance says both vests met federal standards and claims the same type of vest saved 39 police officers' lives.

The company insists it did not have conclusive tests proving the vests might fail until last fall — and then they immediately recalled all of them — months after the shootings.

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