

Kin of DWI victim awarded \$24.7 million

■ Driver, rental car firm and insurance company must pay

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A Harris County jury on Wednesday awarded \$24.7 million to the family of a woman killed by a drunken driver who had rented a car despite having multiple citations and a suspended license.

Jurors held the driver responsible, as well as his car insurance company and the rental car agency.

Helen Nettles, 56, died after the car driven by Jeffrey Lamont Tate hit her pickup from behind on Nov. 29, 2000, while he was intoxicated and driving at high speeds, according to court documents. Nettles' truck struck a light pole and burst into flames.

Tate pleaded guilty to a charge of intoxication manslaughter with a vehicle and is

servicing a 13-year sentence.

His insurance company, Progressive County Mutual Insurance, had arranged for him to rent a car from Enterprise Leasing Co. the day before the crash, said Richard Mithoff, attorney for Nettles' family.

Just days earlier, Tate had been released from the Harris County Jail after being cited on a charge of driving while intoxicated. He also had a suspended license.

"In two months, he had two DWIs and he could not drive legally," Mithoff said. "And they nevertheless went ahead and arranged for the rental car."

Enterprise spokeswoman Christy Conrad told the Associated Press that Tate had presented the company with a valid driver's license. She said the company previously reached a confidential settlement with the Nettles family and the settlement will stand, despite the jury's verdict.

Tate's attorney, John Causey,

said his client was happy to get the case behind him and was concerned about Nettles' family.

Causey said the proceeds of a \$20,000 insurance policy Tate had were turned over to the family shortly after the crash.

He said Tate has no other assets.

Progressive's lawyer, Kevin Hood, declined to comment.

The civil jury award came after a five-day trial.

JURY'S JUDGMENT

Who pays the \$24.7 million verdict:

■ Jeffrey Lamont Tate:
\$14.82 million

■ Progressive County Mutual
Insurance Co.: \$4.94 million

■ Enterprise Leasing Co.:
\$4.94 million

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