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E-mails released in drinking death of Wabash student

Attorney: 'Hazing and alcohol abuse were rampant' at fraternity

Associated Press

CARMEL, Ind. -- An attorney representing the family of a Wabash College freshman who died of alcohol poisoning released e-mails last week that he said paint a picture of an out-of-control fraternity house.

The family of 18-year-old Johnny D. Smith, Tucson, Ariz., wants to know whether hazing played a role in his death.

"There is no conduct policy at Wabash; there is no alcohol policy. There is a gentlemen's rule that is no rule," attorney Stephen Wagner said during a news conference at his Carmel office.

Smith was found unconscious at the Delta Tau Delta chapter house Oct. 5; paramedics pronounced him dead at the scene. The college disbanded the chapter after an investigation, and Delta Tau Delta national headquarters also suspended the chapter.

The freshman's death was the second in about a year at Wabash in which alcohol might have played a part. A 19-year-old freshman died in October 2007 after he slipped off a roof. Tests showed he had been drinking.

Wagner said the profanity-laced e-mails and others that Smith's family had uncovered showed "an out-of-control fraternity house where hazing and alcohol abuse were rampant."

Although officials with the fraternity's national office have declined to say whether a party was held at the house the night before Smith's death, one of the e-mails indicates a party had been planned for that weekend.

"There will be an abundance of alcohol," including four beer kegs, the e-mail states.

One e-mail warns members to deny, during a visit from a national fraternity representative, that hazing occurs; another urges members to haze others if they fail to do kitchen chores.

Delta Tau Delta Executive Vice President Jim Russell said the national fraternity's investigation was ongoing, and he would not comment on the materials distributed at the news conference.

But Russell said the news conference seemed contrary to ethical standards that prohibit lawyers from discussing matters under investigation or potential litigation before trial.
