

7 Utah jail deaths in 2017, down more than two-thirds from the year before

SUNDAY, APRIL 15, 2018 - 5:00 AM



Davis County Jail in Farmington on July 19, 2016.

<http://www.standard.net/Police-Fire/2018/04/15/7-Utah-jail-deaths-in-2017-down-more-than-two-thirds-from-the-year-before.html>

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OGDEN — Seven people died in Utah’s county jails in 2017, down sharply from a record 25 the year before, according to records obtained from sheriff’s offices around the state.

“We are hopeful that there have been some improvements” in jail operations, said Leah Farrell, staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah, which has been pushing jails toward more openness.

“From our perspective, there is just so much to know and understand, and transparency is needed,” she said. “The extraordinary number of deaths the previous year helped open our eyes to what we don’t know about the jails and how they’re being run.”

The Standard-Examiner last year requested 2016’s jail death records from Utah’s 29 counties. Twenty-three deaths were reported. Two more jail-related deaths were discovered with

additional record requests to the Weber and Davis county sheriff's offices. Those two deaths had not been counted because the inmates died later at hospitals, not in the jails.

Story continues below chart.

A similar survey for 2017 deaths yielded answers from 20 counties. Nine others did not respond to emailed and mailed record requests.

Salt Lake County led the state with four jail deaths in 2017. Weber, Davis, and San Juan counties reported one each. Six of the deaths were suicides. The seventh, a man who collapsed in the Davis jail booking area, was an apparent drug overdose.

In 2016, the Davis jail had six deaths, Salt Lake five, and Weber and Utah counties three each. Davis County Sheriff Todd Richardson said the streak of deaths caused his office to update policies, shift personnel and train more people in emergency medicine.

Responding to the wave of deaths, the Utah Legislature in March 2018 passed a law requiring jails and state prisons to file annual reports of jail deaths. The bill closed a loophole that had allowed jails to avoid reporting inmates' hospital deaths, and it instructed jails to detail programs they have to deal with inmates addicted to opioids.

But advocates for transparency in jail standards and inspections suffered a defeat Thursday, April 12, before the State Records Committee.

Farrell said the committee voted down an appeal filed by the ACLU and the Disability Law Center that challenged Davis County's refusal to release its jail standards and audit results. The Davis jail failed a state audit in 2016 but the county and state refused to reveal details.

The Records Committee sided with the county's argument that it does not possess the standards and the audits because they are housed in a proprietary computer software system owned by a consultant for the Utah Sheriffs' Association. The sheriffs' group is a private, nonprofit organization with the 29 county sheriffs as its members.

Farrell said the county's insistence that revealing the jail standards and audit results would be a copyright violation "is a sidestep, a way to keep that information from the public."

"Audits and standards that a public institution uses should be made public," Farrell said. "They're held in this kind of black-box way that can't be how public institutions are run." Non-proprietary parts of the jail standards were published online by the Sheriffs' Association in February.

Efforts to contact Blake Hamilton, an attorney who represented Davis County in the records case, were not immediately successful Friday.

Farrell said the civil liberties groups are considering whether to appeal the committee's decision to state district court.

Meantime, Farrell said the ACLU is heartened that the Utah Department of Corrections and the Sheriffs' Association are working together to draft next-generation prison and jail standards that will be open to the public.

"We encourage robust standards that ensure the constitutionality of our jails and provide a safe place where hopefully our jail deaths and suffering in jail can be further reduced," Farrell said. "But it is telling that we are continuing to have to go on with the fight right now."

Utah led the nation in jail deaths per capita in 2014, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. More recent federal statistics have not been released.

Davis and Weber counties face a series of civil lawsuits filed by relatives of inmates who died behind bars in 2016. Plaintiffs allege poor medical care, insufficient suicide prevention, official carelessness and indifference, and weak policies and training.

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