

Northern Utah jails post lowest inmate death total in 7 years

By MARK SHENEFELT

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One inmate death was reported in 2018 among the Weber, Davis and Box Elder county jails, the lowest total since 2011.

The three counties filed reports required to be submitted by Aug. 1 each year to the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice. The Standard-Examiner obtained the reports with open records requests.

The lone fatality was Casey James Berensen, 44, who died June 4, 2018, four days after he was found hanging in a medical cell in the Weber County Jail. The death was listed as an apparent suicide — by far the leading cause of jail deaths in the past decade.

In 2017, Davis and Weber each reported one death and Box Elder none.

The Utah Legislature in 2018 passed a law requiring that the annual reports be submitted to the state. The state monitoring came after a record year of jail deaths statewide in 2016: 27, according to records collected from county sheriff's offices.

Davis County's jail led the state with six deaths in 2016. Weber had three and Box Elder one. The statewide total dropped to seven deaths in 2017.

The combined totals in the three-county area were three deaths in 2015, seven in 2014 and eight the year before. Four deaths, all in the Weber Jail, were reported in 2012. Weber had the only death in the three-county area in 2011 — the last year with just one death.

'We are glad to see these numbers moving in the right direction,' Marina Lowe of the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah said in an email Thursday. "While it is still too early to determine the reasons jail deaths are going down, everyone remains committed to understanding and addressing this serious challenge."

So far in 2019, at least two deaths have occurred in the region's jails, both in Weber County. Roger David Campbell, 53, died Jan. 9, found hanging in his cell three days after he was arrested on fraud charges. The state medical examiner later ruled it a suicide.

Eric Arthur Gavin, 39, died June 12, the same day he was booked on an alleged parole violation. He had been out on parole after serving prison time for third-degree felony DUI.

The Weber County Sheriff's Office said Gavin suffered a "medical episode" in the jail, and he died later at a local hospital. As of Thursday, the death remained under investigation.

After the justice commission's compilation of 2017 jail death data from around the state, legislators said possible additional monitoring efforts would focus on prevention of suicide, the leading cause of death.

State policy-makers also are delving into how jails treat drug-addicted, withdrawing inmates. Several inmates in recent years have died of dehydration and other effects related to drug withdrawal.

You can reach reporter Mark Shenefelt at mshenefelt@standard.net or 801 625-4224. Follow him on Twitter at [@mshenefelt](https://twitter.com/mshenefelt).