

Chair Jessica Vega Pederson
Commissioner Sharon Meieran
Commissioner Susheela Jayapal
Commissioner Julia Brim-Edwards
Commissioner Lori Stegmann

Via email.

July 28, 2023

Re: Deaths in custody at the Multnomah County jail

Dear Chair Vega Pederson and Commissioners Meieran, Jayapal, Brim-Edwards and Stegmann,

We write to express our shared concern regarding the number of people who have recently died while in the custody of the Multnomah County Sheriff. We ask that you act swiftly in your oversight role to launch an independent investigation of conditions at the Inverness Jail (MCIJ) and the Multnomah County Detention Center (MCDC).

Since May, five indigent people are known to have died in the custody of the Sheriff:

- Twenty-six-year-old Donovan Anthony Wood died at MCIJ on May 2,
- Thirty-one-year-old Allen George Walker died at MCDC on May 13,
- Fifty-eight-year-old Martin Todd Franklin died at MCDC on June 16,
- Fifty-three-year-old Kashi Abram Harmon died at MCIJ on June 22, and
- Thirty-one-year-old Josiah Pierce died at MCIJ on July 19.

Recent reporting by *Willamette Week* based on information from the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission and Reuters shows how unusually high this rate of jail deaths is.¹ The data show that since 2010 there has been no year in which five people have died in the custody of the Sheriff with the highest numbers of deaths at four apiece in 2010 and 2015. In 2023, we have already seen five deaths, all in the last three months, and we are barely more than halfway through the year. Last year, there were three deaths and there were none in 2021.

¹ <https://www.wweek.com/news/2023/07/22/sheriff-responds-to-largest-number-of-multnomah-county-jail-deaths-in-more-than-a-decade/>

By contrast, seven people have died this year at the Rikers Island complex in New York, an enormous facility infamous for its violence, disorder, and high number of in-custody deaths. Rikers' daily population is over 5,550,² compared to 867 in Multnomah County jails.³ Considering the relative populations of each, the 2023 death rate in Multnomah County jail is more than quadruple that of Rikers.

Within the country's largest jail system, Los Angeles County, also known for its overcrowding, poor conditions and high rate of jail deaths, 25 people have died so far this year.⁴ Considering LA County's jail population of over 12,860,⁵ the 2023 death rate in Multnomah County is more than triple that of LA.

To see such a frequency of death in our jails, particularly when compared to two of the most notorious jails and jail systems in the country, causes our organizations great consternation and we urge you to act swiftly to prevent further deaths.

The Multnomah County Auditor published a report in April 2022,⁶ highlighting significant health and safety risks identified by adults in county custody, particularly for Black people and people with mental health conditions who were detained. A staggering 30% of those who take medication for mental health conditions reported never receiving their medication while in custody, and another 23% waited more than five days before receiving it. Additionally, 42% of adults in custody who struggle with drugs or alcohol reported that they asked jail staff for help but were not provided with any support. Further, more than half of adults in custody reported they did not know who to talk to if they felt unsafe, with some reporting that those who do ask for help are subject to retaliation and discipline by jail staff. The Auditor recommended deadlines for making improvements which expired between September 2022 and April 2023. It is unclear what steps, if any, have been taken to protect adults in custody from the risks identified in the audit.

Last fall, voters overwhelmingly approved Measure 26-233, with three quarters of them voting to direct you as county commissioners to inspect jails annually where state law requires only one inspection per regular four-year term. This was specifically described in the ballot measure summary as being intended "to ensure transparency and oversight."⁷ Multnomah County voters see a need for you to take an active role in ensuring that people who are held in the custody of the Sheriff are being treated humanely and appropriately. Let that clear message from voters be your guide when contemplating intervening in this crisis.

We ask that you use your oversight role to ensure a system-wide independent investigation into what is happening within the Multnomah County jails. Furthermore, in the interests of transparency, we ask for the prompt release of information about these deaths and about how jail

² The daily population was 5,559 in 2022. https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2022/2022_mmr.pdf

³ The daily population in June 2023. https://mcsos.us/site/pdf/stats/06_Jail%20Report%20June%202023.pdf

⁴ <https://lasd.org/transparency/icd/>

⁵ The daily population was 12,863 as of July 25, 2023. https://lasd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Transparency_Custody_Division_Daily_Briefing_072523.pdf

⁶ <https://multco-web7-psh-files-usw2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/MultcoAuditorJailConditionsAuditReport.pdf>

⁷ <https://multco-web7-psh-files-usw2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/20220907161820521.pdf>

operations may have contributed to the loss of life. We are sure you share our concern about reaching a full understanding of what happened to these five people and how we can ensure that there are no further deaths within our jails.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

Bobbin Singh
Executive Director
Oregon Justice Resource Center

Stacey Reding
Executive Director
Multnomah Defenders, Inc.

cc:

Jennifer McGuirk, Auditor
Sheriff Nicole Morrissey O'Donnell
District Attorney Mike Schmidt