

Accounts Of 'Cruelty' And 'Indifference' At Salt Lake County Jail Have Some Calling For Reform

kuer.org/justice/2020-07-22/accounts-of-cruelty-and-indifference-at-salt-lake-county-jail-have-some-calling-for-reform

July 22, 2020



News

Renee Bright / KUER

Meagan Deadrich was 27 weeks pregnant when she was booked into the Salt Lake County Jail on a probation violation in 2018. Soon after, she started bleeding and knew something was very wrong.

“I’ve never bled through any of my babies,” Deadrich said. “I’ve never bled. Ever.”

Deadrich said she called the jail staff for help, and they responded by giving her pads. She spotted blood for two weeks before the jail doctor came, examined her and said she was fine. Later that night, Deadrich suddenly was taken to the University of Utah Hospital.

“They surprisingly came that night and said we’re taking a ride up to the U, where they did not find a heartbeat,” she said. “They had to take my uterus, and my baby was dead.”



Credit Emily Means / KUER

Meagan Deadrich miscarried at the Salt Lake County Jail after bleeding for two weeks. She said jail staff didn't take her concerns seriously.

Deadrich's case is one of four that attorney and former Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson described in a nearly 200-page letter to state lawmakers and Salt Lake County's elected leaders.

According to Anderson, Lisa Ostler died from peritonitis within three days of entering the Salt Lake County jail, after crying out for help for hours. Angie Turner complained of headaches for days, then had a stroke and died. David Walker told a mental health worker he was having suicidal thoughts. The staff member reportedly handed Walker a brochure. Walker said it wouldn't help, and he later died by suicide.

It's just a few examples, Anderson said, of poor treatment of inmates.

"There is a systemic culture at the Salt Lake County Jail of immense disdain, even a cruelty, and certainly indifference towards inmates, on all levels," Anderson said. "Including an indifference toward their serious medical problems."

Anderson said he found a number of issues at the jail, with staff keeping incomplete records and guards ignoring or demeaning inmates when they asked for help. He said if the jail staff had taken them seriously, Deadrich's miscarriage — and those three deaths — could have been prevented.

That's why Anderson is pushing for an overhaul of policies and practices.

"People working for the county at the jail cause or allow this kind of devastation, and nobody holds them to account," he said. "In fact, they don't even take the measures, usually, to find out what happened."

But Salt Lake County Sheriff Rosie Rivera said she has made changes at the jail since taking office in 2017. There's an addiction treatment program, a new records-keeping system and it's now policy for guards to respond to all medical calls made by inmates.

"We want to make sure that we're listening to the people in our facility and that we're doing everything we possibly can, on our part, to prevent injuries or death," Rivera said.

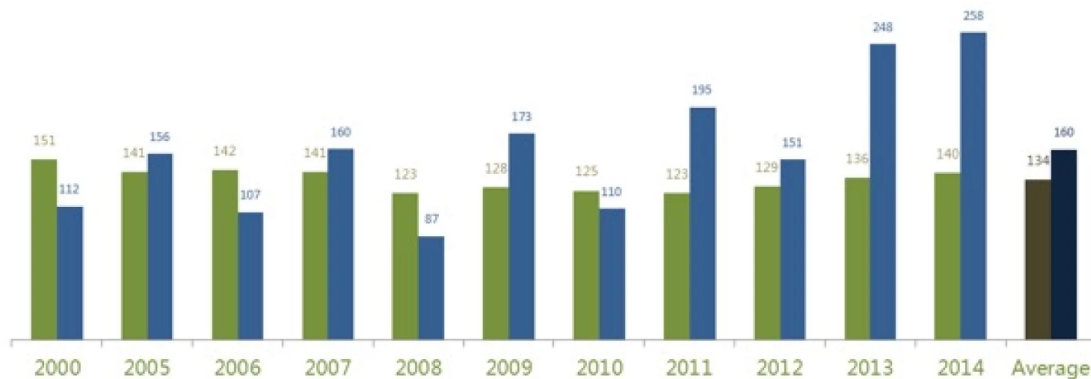
She wouldn't comment on any of the cases Anderson mentioned due to pending litigation. Rivera did say there's room for improvement at facilities, but the bigger issue is who gets sent to jail to begin with.

Rivera said a lot of the inmates are there because of drug addiction or mental health issues, and right now, there's nowhere else for them to go.

"Maybe some of those folks really should not be in a jail facility," she said. "We need alternatives to incarceration."

That's where Rivera hopes the state Legislature comes in — because it's not just a Salt Lake County issue. And Anderson has pitched a few proposals to lawmakers, including fast-tracking a substance abuse treatment program that diverts people from jails.

Figure 3a
Mortality Rate per 100,000 2000, 2005 – 2014
Total U.S. vs. Utah



Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Credit Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice

Utah has consistently outpaced the national average for jail deaths per capita, based on the most current data available to the state. A report coming out later this year will have updated data from the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice.

From 2013 through 2018, 78 people died in jails across the state, according to a report from the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice. That's consistently higher than the national average for per capita jail deaths. More than half were suicides, 21% were because of physical illness, and 9% were related to alcohol or drug intoxication.

Sen. Todd Weiler, R-Woods Cross, said a diversion program is a priority for him.

“If it was clearly obvious that someone was going through distress because of withdrawals and detox, then at some point they should step in and have some resources available to them,” Weiler said.

Weiler has worked on similar issues in the past. In 2018, he and Rep. Carol Spackman Moss, D-Holladay, co-sponsored a bill requiring more transparent reporting of jail deaths and treatment policies for people with substance abuse issues.

From his conversations with county sheriffs, Weiler said a lot of people enter the jail who struggle with addiction.

“They're forced to kind of dry out on their own,” Weiler said. “They don't have any emotional support. They don't have any social workers holding their hands. They don't have any methadone.”

But Anderson said if Rivera and the county wanted to set up a diversion program, they would have already.

“If they're not going to make the policy decisions to fix these problems and not be transparent with the public, they don't belong where they are,” he said. “We need other people who are going to take on that responsibility.”

As for Meagan Deadrich, she said she wants staff to be held accountable.

“The way they treat people, it's wrong,” she said. “We are all human beings. We all have feelings.”

Earlier this year, Salt Lake County paid \$950,000 to Lisa Ostler's family in a lawsuit settlement. Deadrich recently filed her own lawsuit against the county for damages.

If you or someone you know needs help, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255, the Utah Crisis Line at 801-587-3000 or the Crisis Text Line by texting 741741.

Emily Means

Emily Means was raised in Layton, Utah, but she's found her place in Salt Lake City. She's worked at just about every public radio station in and around Salt Lake, starting as a weekend host at KUER in 2015, then a producer at KRCL and KCPW and a municipal reporter at KPCW in Park City. As one of KUER's politics reporters, Emily is most passionate about social justice issues. She loves drinking lattes from local coffee shops and exploring her neighborhood in search of cats.

See stories by Emily Means