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LOCAL

A Sacramento jail inmate died in May. The Sheriff's Office never told the public.

BY THERESA CLIFT

AUGUST 29, 2023 5:00 AM





Wendi Fisher



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Wendi Fisher flew from Illinois to be at her ex-husband's bedside after he was transferred from Sacramento County Main Jail to the hospital. Norman Fisher was in a coma when she arrived. He died May 27 at age 47.

The only reason The Sacramento Bee learned Norman Fisher's name was because Wendi identified him.

Unlike the other five downtown jail inmates who have died so far this year, the Sheriff's Office did not issue a news release or social media post to inform the public. As a result, there was no media coverage.

Wendi Fisher noticed.

"I feel heartbroken," Wendi Fisher said. "It's like he didn't matter."

There has been a more consistent public announcement of inmate deaths in the past two years, but the Sheriff's Office has a history of failing to notify the public of jail deaths. In August 2021 a [Bee investigation revealed](#) the office failed to announce multiple inmate deaths.

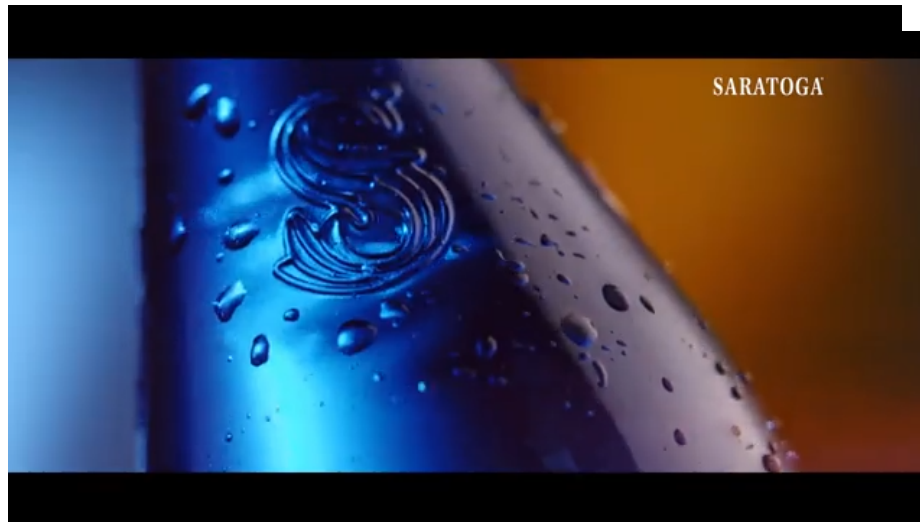
Sheriff's Office spokesman Sgt. Amar Gandhi did not respond to an email asking why the office did not announce Norman Fisher's death.

FEW DETAILS KNOWN

Norman Fisher lived in Woodland and worked in a carbon factory, Wendi Fisher said. He had two children, the youngest of whom is 13.

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“He loved to fish, barbecue and hang out with his friends,” Wendi Fisher said. “He loved to make people laugh. All kids loved him.”

When he arrived in the jail in February, he was healthy, Wendi Fisher said. He then started to complain of being congested.

“He was calling me all the time on the phone two to three times a day and was like, ‘I don’t feel good, I think I have a sinus infection,’” Wendi Fisher said. “I tried to call the jail and they didn’t answer.”

The next time Wendi Fisher saw him, he was in a coma in the hospital, where he would stay for four days before dying. It’s unknown what happened at the jail before he arrived at the hospital.

[A new independent medical report](#) revealed mistakes by jail medical staff preceding [the deaths of several other inmates](#). But the report, prompted by a federal settlement in a 2019 class action lawsuit called the Mays Consent Decree, does not include Norman Fisher’s death.

The death certificate stated Norman Fisher’s cause of death was septic shock, a bacterial infection, acute kidney failure and pneumonia.

When it became clear Norman Fisher was going to die, the Sheriff’s Office did a so-called compassionate release from custody, to allow Wendi Fisher to visit him. The Sheriff’s Office has announced other inmates’ deaths who were on compassionate releases, including Justin Dean Smith, who died in August 2022.

Despite the compassionate release, the Sheriff’s Office considered his an inmate death, because it told Inspector General Francine Tournour. She told the Community Review Commission, a Sheriff’s Office oversight body, about the death May 30. She had few details, and did not share a name.

Mark Merin, a longtime Sacramento civil rights attorney, said the Sheriff’s Office should announce all inmate deaths, including those on compassionate release.

“When (an inmate) dies, it’s an event that has to be publicized,” said Merin, who has [sued the county multiple times](#) over inmate deaths. “The public obviously has an interest of improving the conditions of our jails ... The publication of deaths informs the public who can then respond by demanding appropriate improvements and change.”

Wendi Fisher agreed. She’s disappointed that she never got a phone call explaining what happened, and she likely never will.

“Just because a person is a criminal does not make them less of a person,” Wendi Fisher said. “Families should not have to worry when our loved ones are in jail that they’re not being taken care of. I understand he did something wrong. But what he did wrong did not need to cost him his life. They need to be held accountable for what goes on in the jails.”

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