



## PRISON LAW OFFICE

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VIA EMAIL

Sheriff Jim Cooper  
Sacramento County  
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August 19, 2024

Dear Sheriff Cooper,

As you know, there has been a wave of deaths in the Sacramento County Jails in recent months. In the past three months, five people have died in the custody of the Sacramento Sheriff's Office (SSO). As class counsel in the *Mays v. Sacramento* lawsuit, we are gravely concerned about these deaths. For years, we have raised concerns about the custody culture of the Sacramento Sheriff's Office. Having reviewed the surveillance and body-worn camera footage of several recent deaths, we write to again express our deep concern about the SSO's failure to respond with humanity and decency to people in need. Below, we describe the tragic death of one man who died in the booking loop of Sacramento County's Main Jail in May 2024 and the way in which it reflects our broader and long-standing concerns.

In May 2024, an unhoused, middle-aged, Black man was brought into the jail in the middle of the night. Because he was unable to stand on his own, arresting officers dragged him through the parking lot and into the jail to begin the intake process. The SSO has informed us that the man was arrested due to outstanding warrants for trespassing and petty theft, not because he had any new charges.

From the moment he entered the jail, the man was unable to stand. In the arrest reports room—the first stop in the intake process—the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) could not take his vital signs because he was shaking and unable to remain still. He soon fell to the floor, where he remained for several minutes. Video footage shows that while the man was lying on the floor, the arresting officer from the Sacramento Police Department appeared to casually engage in a conversation with the CNA. Neither the arresting officer nor the CNA showed any alarm that this man was lying on the floor and unable to stand on his own; they continued having a conversation over his body. Eventually, a staff member decided to remove the man from the floor. But instead of getting a wheelchair to transport him through the booking process or considering whether his inability to stand suggested a need for hospitalization, staff placed him in a cart intended for short-term use for transporting combative arrestees. He remained in that cart for the next two and a half hours.

Around 2 AM—about an hour after the man arrived at the jail—a Registered Nurse assigned to the intake area of the jail engaged in a brief conversation with him. The conversation, which lasted less than four minutes, was the extent of the medical evaluation to determine whether this person was

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medically fit for incarceration. The nurse conducted the “medical intake” within earshot of other arrestees in the non-confidential part of the arrest reports room. The nurse failed to ask required medical intake questions, then falsified information on the medical intake form. After this less-than-four-minute-long conversation, the nurse cleared the man as medically fit for incarceration. These egregious failures by medical staff will be the subject of a forthcoming letter by the federal court-appointed medical experts.

The man remained alone, laying in the cart, for the next 90 minutes, with minimal interaction with any staff members. Around 3:30 AM, the SSO took formal “custody” of the man and began the custodial intake process. The SSO deputies dragged him out of the cart, but he was still unable to stand on his own. Minutes later, deputies placed him back into the cart. By that point, he had defecated on himself and was covered in feces.

The deputies then decided to drag the man’s mostly limp body through the intake process. They pulled him out of the cart and yelled at him, “Stop playing games!” They then brought him out of the arrest reports room and conducted a pat-down body search on him. As they dragged him, his pants came down, leaving him completely exposed from the waist down.

The man remained unable to form a coherent sentence and appeared largely incapable of motion. Nonetheless, the deputies persisted in processing him through the standard intake protocol. They dragged his motionless body down the hallway, cuffed and facedown on the floor. At 3:39 AM, deputies dragged him to the photo station so that they could take his intake photo. Because the man could not hold his head up on his own, deputies grabbed him by his hair and yanked his slumped head against the wall so that they could capture the intake photo. The surveillance video shows the man on his knees with his genitals exposed as two deputies hold his nearly lifeless head up by his hair. His booking photo similarly shows two deputies’ black-gloved fists grabbing his hair to hold his head up.

Deputies then turned the man to the side and again yanked his hair back to take a booking photo from his profile. At that point, he was mumbling, “I am Jesus Christ” and other incoherent noises. His voice sounded drowsy, like it was difficult for him to form sounds. He demonstrated no resistance, either verbally or physically, at any point.

At 3:41 AM, deputies uncuffed the man so they could scan his fingerprints. The man’s limp body laid near the fingerprint station as the deputy moved his arm around to capture a viable fingerprint scan. A minute later, the intake nurse walked by the fingerprint station. A sergeant who was seated nearby observing this intake process asked the nurse whether the man had cleared medical intake. The nurse responded, “His vitals were fine. He’s just old and homeless.” The nurse briefly walked back to look at the patient, and then said, “He’s breathing. He’s just uncooperative.” The nurse then walked away.

Minutes later, after completing the fingerprint scan, deputies finally appeared to acknowledge that this person needed immediate medical attention. They began asking him if he was okay, and they checked for his pulse. At 3:46 AM, life-saving care was initiated, and custody staff called the Fire Department. At 4:20 AM, he was pronounced dead.

Video footage shows no evidence of custody staff verbally abusing this man, but the story of his death highlights a profound and persistent problem with the Sheriff’s Office—callousness, apathy,

and unacceptable tolerance for human suffering. The deputies who processed this man through the booking process did so with no regard for his extreme physical distress. An hour before he died, they told him he was playing games because he was unable to stand. They did not deviate from their standard booking protocol for a person in the final moments of his life. They grabbed him by the hair to take his intake photo. As he laid on the floor, they held his limp hand on the fingerprint scanner to make sure his fingerprints were captured in the system. They were simply going about business as usual.

This callousness on the part of the Sacramento Sheriff's Office is consistent with our reporting over the years. We and the court-appointed experts have reported for years about these profound cultural problems. It is commonplace in the jails for custody staff to ignore people in crisis who press the emergency buttons in their cells begging for help. The medical experts [recently reported](#) about a man whose face was swollen to the point that his right eye was completely closed requesting assistance from a deputy. The deputy told him that he did not have an emergency and to stop bothering staff.

Last month, we wrote to the SSO about a person with acute mental illness who had been housed on the most restrictive floor of the jail. When we visited the jail, numerous people told us that this person had been screaming at all hours of the day and night, refusing meals, and urinating on the floor of his cell. People told us that deputies' response to his decompensation was simply to place a towel down outside of his cell so that his urine did not leak out of his cell.

The recent deaths in the jails are a symptom of a larger and long-standing cultural problem with the Sacramento Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff must take accountability for the apathy and callousness that pervades the jail and exercise leadership to make immediate changes. Sacramento County should demand decency for the people it incarcerates.

Sincerely,

Patrick Booth  
Margot Mendelson  
Prison Law Office

Aaron Fischer  
Law Office of Aaron J. Fischer

cc: Sarah Britton, County Counsel  
Eric Jones, Deputy County Executive  
*Mays* Court-Appointed Subject Matter Experts