Fourth suicide since June at Hudson County, New Jersey jail

Mark Ferretti
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Last week, 26-year-old Carlos Borroto was found dead in his cell at Hudson County Corrections and Rehabilitation Center in Kearny, New Jersey, a suburb of Newark. He had tied a laundry bag around his neck and hanged himself from his bed. His death marks the fourth suicide, and sixth death overall, at the jail since June 2017.

The act of desperation cannot have taken prison officials by surprise. When officers of the West New York police department arrested Borroto on Friday, March 23, on open warrants, he yelled, "I want to jump off a bridge!" The officers brought Borroto to Palisades Medical Center, where he was evaluated and released into police custody. He had been charged with domestic violence, aggravated assault, animal cruelty, and resisting arrest.

While he was being processed for incarceration, Borroto told correctional staff that he had mental health problems. If the staff had properly reviewed their records, they would have known that in May 2017 Borroto had told medical personnel at the jail that he had suicidal thoughts. But, overlooking his previous report of suicidal thoughts and his current complaint of mental health problems, the staff assigned him to the general population instead of to a mental health ward.

In response to Borroto's death, Hudson County Executive Tom DeGise issued a hypocritical statement of outrage. After he met with staff at the jail on Monday, the county ended its $29.4-million contract with CFG Health Systems, which had provided medical care at the jail.

Borroto's suicide is only the latest product of the criminal neglect and inadequate health care that has persisted for years at Hudson County jail.

While she was on mental health watch in January, 34-year-old Cynthia Acosta used a torn sheet to hang herself from the bed of her cell in the infirmary. An officer held Acosta as someone cut the sheet, and staff immediately administered CPR and called 911. First responders were able to regain Acosta's pulse and bring her to Jersey City Medical Center, but she died there two days later.

On the day of Acosta's suicide, Dominick J. Ramunni, 41, collapsed inside the jail while awaiting sentencing for burglary. He was pronounced dead approximately 45 minutes later after a failed attempt at CPR. Prison officials began a review of Ramunni's medical history to determine whether he had been receiving appropriate treatment.

In July 2017, 48-year-old Jennifer Towle died after ingesting three liters of inedible items such as a nail clipper, an examination glove, Styrofoam, condiment packages, milk cartons, paper, a band-aid, a plastic bag, and a cookie wrapper. Towle had been on suicide watch because of her diagnosis of depression. At the time of her death, she was two days from being released after serving a six-month sentence for driving while intoxicated. The medical staff at the jail asserted that they had given Towle "the care she needed," said county spokesperson Jim Kennell.

While incarcerated at the facility in June 2017, 35-year-old Rolando Meza Espinoza had gastrointestinal bleeding and was sent to Jersey City Medical Center. He died two days later in the center's intensive care unit. An autopsy was not performed.

Meza, an immigrant from Honduras, had cirrhosis of the liver, anemia, and diabetes. He had been arrested by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents who mistook him for someone else. He was brought to Hudson County jail, which partnered with ICE. While in jail, Meza only received treatment for diabetes, despite asking a nurse for the other

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medications that he needed. Shockingly, staff did not notify Meza's family of his death. His relatives only learned what had happened two days later when they called the jail to check on him.

Other inmates have survived their time at the facility despite a lack of proper care but have been released in significantly poorer health. An HIV-positive man from the Dominican Republic identified by his lawyers as John Doe was arrested in November 2014 because of an ongoing immigration case. In January 2015, he complained of pain and received a diagnosis of hemorrhoids from the medical staff. The staff did not consider other explanations for the pain, nor did they monitor the man's condition. During the next 12 months, medical staff did not screen or treat the man despite his ongoing complaints of bleeding, swollen feet and ankles, fatigue, and numbness.

After a medical exam in January 2016, staff sent the man to a hospital in East Orange, where doctors found a cancerous mass in his rectum. In April 2016, he underwent installation of a Mediport (a device inserted under the skin to draw blood or inject medicines) to enable the administration of chemotherapy for stage four cancer. Five days after the surgery, Hudson County jail released him "with no plan for continuity of care or any information regarding how to maintain the Mediport," according to his lawyers. Because the jail had not given the man his medical records indicating his need for emergency care, two hospitals denied him treatment before he finally was able to receive care.

Throughout these years of medical neglect and unnecessary deaths, DeGise largely held his peace. His sudden intervention to end the contract with CFG comes at a time when his own political career is on the line. Weeks ago, Mayor Steve Fulop of Jersey City and Mayor Brian Stack of Union City said that they would not support DeGise's run for a fifth term in 2019. Earlier this month, in another effort to save his own skin, DeGise announced that the county would end its unpopular partnership with ICE.

Despite the public outcry and official protestations of outrage, medical treatment at the jail is not likely to improve. The county will select another contractor to provide medical services, and the new contractor will have the same incentives as CFG to cut expenses and reduce services so that it can maximize profits for its shareholders.

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