Homeless 73-year-old dies while being held in Arlington County jail in Northern Virginia

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On the morning of Sunday, August 27, sheriff's deputies at the detention center in Arlington County, Virginia, found 73-year-old Abonesh Woldegeorges unresponsive in her cell and were unable to resuscitate her. Woldegeorges, who was homeless, is the eighth person to die at the jail in as many years.

Woldegeorges had been arrested by police at Reagan National Airport in the middle of the night last month. She was booked into the Arlington County detention facility on August 13 at 4:13 a.m. local time on the charge of trespassing and violating conditions of release. She was being held on a $500 bond she evidently was unable to pay. For the next 15 days Woldegeorges sat in jail.

The county medical examiner has yet to reach a determination as to the exact cause of death. The Arlington County sheriff's office had been planning to transport her to neighboring Loudoun County, another Northern Virginia county just outside of Washington D.C. The woman was facing more charges for not appearing in court in connection to an earlier trespassing case that led to her arrest this past May.

Woldegeorges is the first person to die in jail under the watch of Jose Quiroz, a Democrat and acting county sheriff who replaced Beth Arthur earlier this year.

In October 2021, the county ended its contract with Corizon Health, its medical services provider, after an inmate, Darryl Becton, died of complications related to opioid withdrawal in 2020. The county also reached a $1.3 million settlement with Becton's family over negligence by jail staff.

For Woldegeorges, her two arrests this year were not the first in connection with trespassing. Since 2020, she had been arrested in Arlington and Loudoun counties. Arlington County Chief Public Defender Brad Haywood said trespassing charges in his district are usually reserved for the homeless or people suffering a mental health crisis in public places.

"I can't remember a trespassing client in our office who didn't have a behavioral health disorder or who wasn't homeless," Haywood told DCist. "It's always one or the other. It's policing people who don't have other places to go or who are confused about where they are."

Trespassing charges are used as a way of "criminalizing social conditions in our county," Haywood continued. "You are essentially shifting our community social problems from the agencies that ought to be taking care of it to the jail. The jail's not equipped to be a psychiatric hospital," he said.

According to the county manager's proposed budget for fiscal year 2024, there were over 1,500 times in fiscal year 2023 when the Arlington County Sheriff's Office administered "psychotropic drugs." This indicates a high percentage of inmates dealing with mental health crises, given that 2,764 people were admitted to the county jail in fiscal year 2023.

According to Haywood, some of the clients the public defender's office deals with claim to spend as much as 23 hours in solitary lockup, possibly because of low staffing at the jail.

After another homeless inmate, Paul Thompson, who had a history of mental illness, died of a heart attack at the jail's infirmary in February 2022. Beth Arthur, who was sheriff at the time, said about 170 of the 280 inmates in the jail at that time had some form of mental health challenge, 66 of them being serious cases. Arthur admitted Thompson had no criminal history and should not have been in the jail, blaming the county for "dumping these people in jail when they need serious care."

Arlington County, located across the Potomac River

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from the nation's capital, is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. According to the 2020 US Census, Arlington has the third highest median income level at $77,535 a year. It ranks behind only Manhattan in New York City and Marin County, located in the San Francisco Bay Area.

As with other highly urbanized areas, Arlington County is a stronghold of the Democratic Party. In the "deep blue" county, the Democratic Party has exercised political control at nearly every level since the turn of the millennium.

The county's high level of wealth is directly associated with its proximity to the federal government. Arlington County houses both the Reagan National Airport and the Pentagon, along with several other federal agencies. It is the headquarters of defense contractors Boeing, Raytheon Technologies and BAE Systems.

Amazon, which recently opened its long-anticipated East Coast offices in Arlington, has also contributed to the displacement of the poor and working class. Regarding the opening of Amazon's "HQ2" offices in Arlington's "National Landing Business Improvement District (BID)," the *Washington Post* wrote last year that a "Housing Equity Fund" the company was offering to low income groups "will likely do little to move the needle for the region's lowest-income residents, many of whom are already stretching their paychecks to make rent every month."

For the homeless, being arrested and sent to any of the jails in the capital region for having nowhere else to go oftentimes means the start of a long and arduous process.

In the winter of 2014, police arrested Abreham Zemedagegehu, a homeless man, at Reagan National Airport for "trespassing." At the same Arlington jail where Woldegeorges died, Zemedagegehu, a deaf immigrant, was deprived of his basic social and constitutional rights. Police extracted a confession from Zemedagegehu admitting to stealing an iPad after keeping him in jail for six weeks without access to an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter. The iPad in question turned out not to have ever been stolen.

At the District of Columbia Central Detention Facility, the capital's main jail, a lawsuit brought earlier this year by the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs on behalf of three inmates cited unspeakable conditions at the facility.

Most of these inmates are languishing in jail ahead of their court dates, which can be weeks or months in the future. A report by the DC Policy Center entitled "The District of Columbia's Criminal Justice System under the Revitalization Act" found that 60 percent or more of the 1,400 or so people detained at the DC jail "are awaiting trial, or in other words, have not yet been charged with a crime."

At a public meeting of the DC Interagency Council on Homelessness last month, Executive Director Theresa Silla outlined the troubling statistics for young adults and single adults who are homeless.

Silla said the data show that while homeless families are more likely to make use of the District's voucher program to find housing, when it comes to single adults or adults under the age of 25, there is far less success in housing services.

Just 2 percent of homeless young adults who received city housing services were actually provided with housing in fiscal year 2022. That number was 16 percent for homeless single adults. Single adults make up the largest demographic of homeless people in the DC region.

Earlier this year, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments released a report finding homelessness rose 18 percent in 2022, with the fastest growth not in the urban core but in the suburban periphery, where Arlington and Loudoun counties are located.

Across the entire region, particularly the Northern Virginia suburbs, large office parks and towers stand largely vacant due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on remote work trends. Accordingly, there are more than enough properties and resources available to guarantee everyone living in and around the capital of the world's richest nation safe, high-quality housing. Instead, driven entirely by the interests of big business, authorities in the region are running roughshod over the well-being of the population and criminalizing its most vulnerable.

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