

JAIL BULLETIN

Number 67

August, 1990

SPECIAL NEEDS INMATES PART III

SUICIDAL INMATES

A High-Risk Population — Liability Concerns

State and federal courts have addressed suicide in detention/corrections facilities from a variety of perspectives. The most common theme in suicide-related litigation is liability. Many court decisions describe ways in which individual detention staff, their supervisors, facility managers and elected officials can be held liable for suicides and suicide attempts. This type of suit and the monetary awards which often result are becoming more common.

Many (if not most) suits which seek compensation for suicide are settled out of court. In Settles v. Signal Hill, a reported \$760,000 settlement was reached between a city and the parents of a prisoner who was arrested for speeding; he hanged himself shortly after admission to the city jail.

Court decisions have addressed other aspects of detention facility suicide. The use of physical restraints is the subject of several cases. Physical methods to reduce or prevent suicides are ordered in some cases. Defendants are sometimes found liable for failure to hire appropriate staff, or failing to train staff. In other cases, negligent supervision is alleged.

The common theme among the cases is that plaintiffs have alleged negligence or deficiencies on the part of governmental units or their employees. In some instances, the defendants win; however, when the plaintiffs prevail, courts have ordered monetary awards or injunctive relief (changes in operations or facilities).

Standards

Just as an understanding of court decisions and trends is a starting point for analyzing prisoner suicide issues, standards provide another important foundation for evaluating and improving operations and facilities.

Standards have been developed by most states, and by national professional organizations. For short-term holding facilities, the standards of the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement are pertinent. Jails and other longer-term detention/corrections facilities are addressed by standards which have been adopted by the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections.

Standards have been developed by merging caselaw and professional practice. To that extent, standards often echo the principles which have evolved through litigation. Often, standards exceed caselaw requirements, and sometimes standards even contradict the holding of some courts.

Standards that pertain to suicide issues can be found under such topics as: staff training, physical plant, security, prisoner supervision, medical services, admission and classification.

Suicide Research and Literature

A review of the broad-based research on this topic produces a few clear conclusions, and many areas of confusion.

First, detention and correction facility suicide has been, and continues to be, a major problem in the United States; we share this problem with other countries, and in some instances their problems are even more acute (as in France).

Second, increasing attention is being paid to this problem by a variety of professionals, as evidenced by the breadth of publications which have addressed this topic area. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted in the area of short-term detention facilities (lockups), although the recent Massachusetts study offers some promising results and recommendations.

Third, the "profile" of the "typical" suicide victim has been defined differently by many authors in many settings. The disparity in the profiles which are summarized here gives us cause to question (as others have) whether such an approach is useful. As we learn more about detention/corrections suicides, we find that the "typical" suicide victim may best be defined as David Hogarth of the Charles Street Jail, Boston, stated as... "a living human being."

Finally, most authors agree on some key responses and steps which are necessary to prevent suicide, including:

- * improving intake/reception screening and information collection;
- * training staff to recognize subtle inmate behaviors which may be related to suicidal thoughts and intentions;
- * providing additional mental health, substance abuse and crisis intervention services for inmates;
- * encouraging facility staff to communicate more with inmates and with other staff about inmates; and
- * reducing the opportunity for suicide through physical plant modification and procedural changes.

A Suicide Inventory

An in-depth form that can be used to assess your facility and operation with regard to suicide risk is available in the Small Jail Resource Manual. Readers are encouraged to use this to gain an understanding of the breadth of concern necessary to prevent prisoner suicides.

The sixteen topic areas addressed by the inventory offer convenient categories for examining suicide prevention measures.

The inventory was structured to suggest the appropriate solution, by the construction of each question. For example, if you do not check "yes" for the first questions, you could appropriately conclude that the suggested requisite levels of General Education Development are those which are outlined in the question.

This issue of the "Jail Bulletin " is taken from the Small Jail Resource Manual, Fourth Edition, Rod Miller and Ralph Nichols, Authors, Sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections, U.S. Department of Justice.

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QUIZ

Nebraska Jail Standards require that jail staff receive eighteen (18) hours of in-service training each year. The Jail Bulletin may be used to supplement in-service training if an officer studies the Bulletin, completes the quiz, and this process is documented by the jail administrator for review during annual jail inspection.

SUBJECT: SPECIAL NEEDS INMATES - III NAME _____

NUMBER: 67 DATE _____

1. The most common theme in suicide related litigation is _____

2. Many lawsuits that seek compensation for suicide are settled _____

3. Jail suicides are not much of a problem in this country.
_____ TRUE _____ FALSE

4. There is some disagreement over the profile of the typical suicide victim.
_____ TRUE _____ FALSE

5. List the five key responses and steps given that will help prevent jail suicides.

CREDIT: 1/2 HOUR CREDIT FOR JAIL INSERVICE TRAINING REQUIREMENT
ANSWER SHEET SHOULD BE RETAINED BY JAIL ADMINISTRATOR OR TRAINING OFFICER

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1 - Improving intake/reception screening and information collection.

2 - Training staff to recognize subtle inmate behaviors which may be related to suicidal thoughts and intentions.

3 - Providing additional mental health, substance abuse and crisis intervention services for inmates.

4 - Encouraging facility staff to communicate more with inmates and with other staff about inmates.

5 - Reducing the opportunity for suicide through physical plant modification and procedural changes.

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