

Wisconsin's prison crisis

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'He didn't deserve to die like this': Family seeks answers about suicide during Waupun prison lockdown

<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/investigations/2023/09/28/a-man-died-by-suicide-during-the-waupun-prison-lockdown-his-family-wants-answers/70896455007/>

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'The screams were blood-curdling': Before Cameron Williams died at Waupun, prisoners say he begged staff for help

<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/investigations/2024/03/20/before-cameron-williams-died-at-waupun-prison-he-begged-staff-for-help-wisconsin-doc-lockdown/72956893007/>

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June 6, 2024

Wisconsin Republicans blame Gov. Evers for state's deteriorating prison conditions, call for more oversight and want to close two facilities

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‘He didn’t deserve to die like this’: Family seeks answers about suicide during Waupun prison lockdown

Vanessa Swales and Drake Bentley | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | Sept. 28, 2023

Dean Hoffmann often talked about freedom in letters to his family.

From his cell in Dodge Correctional Institution, he dreamed of creating a home in the countryside, where he would raise chickens and grow rhubarb, asparagus and peas. He wrote about his passion for reading and his love for his children.

In a letter to his son, postmarked in March, he said he was excited about the future.

“I am not sad or depressed in here,” he wrote. “... Being free again will be great.”

Three months later, shortly after being transferred to Waupun Correctional Institution, Dean's family learned he had died by suicide after nine days in solitary confinement.

Dean, who was 60 years old, had a documented history of mental health challenges, including bipolar disorder and suicidal thoughts, according to his family and medical records reviewed by the Journal Sentinel. At the time of his death, he was serving a 28 year sentence for assaulting and tying up his ex-girlfriend in 2018. It was his first criminal charge.

Dean's ex-wife and children are now questioning whether the prison gave him adequate mental health treatment and whether solitary confinement was appropriate, given his diagnosis.

His death also raises larger questions about access to mental health care in Wisconsin jails and prisons, transparency around in-custody deaths, and the frequent use of solitary confinement across the state correctional system.

The state's use of solitary confinement has been on the rise since March, in particular for people with serious mental illnesses, according to figures from the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

Moreover, Dean's death came amid the lockdown at Waupun Correctional Institution, now in its sixth month. People incarcerated at Waupun during this time have been locked in their cells typically 24 hours a day, are not permitted visitors and are banned from gathering in communal spaces. Prisoners say they are living in inhumane conditions and being denied legal services. Prison officials have not signaled an end to the lockdown.

DOC spokesperson Kevin Hoffman declined to answer questions about Dean's mental health care while in custody, citing HIPAA, a medical privacy law. However, he said Dean would not have been denied medication or treatment if a medical professional deemed them necessary.

He said Dean's was the only suicide at the Waupun prison since the lockdown.

But Justin Welch, who has been incarcerated at Waupun since last November, said multiple people have attempted suicide in recent months. In an email to the Journal Sentinel last week, he blamed the stress of the lockdown and the shortage of mental health staff.

"It just kills me," Welch wrote. "This should not be happening on this level at any prison in this country."

Dean faced mental health challenges

Dean and Deborah were childhood sweethearts, meeting in Cedarburg when they were both 18 years old. He was an avid reader and writer, Deborah said.

After having two children, they divorced in 1991 but remained close, according to Deborah. Shortly after they split, Dean was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

For the next 30 years, she said Dean managed his disorder with various medications, although he sometimes struggled with taking it consistently.

Paperwork from Ascension Columbia St. Mary's Ozaukee in Mequon shows Dean was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, "suicidal ideation" and "noncompliance with medications" in 2015. His medical record showed two medications: one antidepressant and another medication commonly used to treat seizures or the manic phase of bipolar disorder.

Three years later, according to court records, Dean was arrested in Sheboygan County after entering his ex-girlfriend's house without permission, punching her and tying her up, before ordering pizza.

Prosecutors charged Dean with a host of crimes, including kidnapping, battery and strangulation.

About a year later, he received more charges, including conspiracy to commit murder, following a conversation in which he encouraged a friend to contact his ex-girlfriend.

Dean pleaded not guilty by mental disease. Court records show a psychologist ultimately testified that Dean had bipolar disorder but was capable of understanding the consequences of his actions. The psychologist's report also noted that, according to Deborah, Dean had stated to multiple people in the days prior to the incident that he was suicidal.

Deborah said Dean was initially "incoherent" after his arrest but soon stabilized while in Sheboygan County Jail. Dean wrote his family many letters stating how well he was doing.

But in the lead-up to his trial in 2022, something changed, according to Deborah. She said it became difficult to hold conversations with Dean again.

"I know Dean medicated, I know Dean not medicated, and I was becoming increasingly concerned," she said.

While the family was unable to confirm their suspicions, letters from Dean and a handful of medical request forms from the months of May to October 2022 show Dean was concerned about his medical care. In one letter, he said a nurse told him he would no longer be receiving his medication because he was refusing to take it. In another, he asked if he could see a doctor.

Sheboygan County Sheriff Cory Roeseler declined to comment about Dean's medical care at the jail, citing HIPAA.

During his trial, Dean's mental health continued to be a concern, according to his former attorney, John Schiro.

Schiro said Dean began to ignore his guidance and instead started taking legal advice over the phone from a prisoner in Oklahoma. Schiro and a second attorney both eventually withdrew from the case.

In February, after more than four years awaiting trial, Dean was convicted on all charges except for conspiracy to commit murder. He was sentenced to 28 years in prison, without an attorney present.

He was then transferred to Dodge Correctional Institution, where recently convicted people are given medical and mental health evaluations and assigned to the appropriate correctional facility.

There, Dean was assigned to Waupun – one of Wisconsin's five maximum-security prisons.

David Liners, executive director of prison advocacy group WISDOM, has urged corrections officials to place individuals with severe mental health conditions in the Wisconsin Resource Center in Oshkosh, which is run by the state's Department of Health Services instead of the DOC.

"We know how to deal with people with severe mental health issues and yet we reserve it for this tiny number," Liners said. "And then there's a whole lot of other people languishing in these places — in particular in these really unhealthy places like Waupun and Green Bay (Correctional Institution)."

Schiro does not feel the justice system took enough account of Dean's mental health challenges.

"He shouldn't have been in a lockdown prison," Schiro said. "He should have been in a locked medical facility."

Phone calls from Dean stopped coming

Dean arrived at Waupun on April 10, less than two weeks after the start of the lockdown.

Immediately, Dean began to tell Deborah about the horrors unfolding at the prison, saying he was placed in one of the worst cell halls.

"He would just keep saying, 'It's just so bad here. It's just so bad,'" Deborah said.

On May 5, in one of the only letters Dean sent from Waupun, he wrote to Deborah that he was trying to get on the right “supplements.” Deborah believes he was taking over-the-counter vitamins to manage his bipolar disorder, in lieu of proper medication.

She said when they did connect on the phone it was brief and difficult to hold a conversation.

Eventually Dean went silent.

On June 20, Dean was placed in solitary confinement for “disobeying orders” and refusing to lock up in his cell, according to DOC.

Nine days later, Dean was dead by suicide.

A prisoner at Waupun, whom the Journal Sentinel is not naming due to concerns about retaliation, said in an email to the Journal Sentinel last week that he often overheard Dean complaining about his medication. Shortly before Dean’s death, the prisoner said he also heard Dean telling guards he felt suicidal.

“As usual, they ignored him,” the prisoner wrote.

The DOC declined to answer questions about whether it had any record of Dean reporting suicidal thoughts prior to his death, citing patient privacy.

Research shows consequences of solitary confinement

Starting in 2009, lawmakers across the country have passed or introduced bills that would curb or stop the use of solitary confinement.

A 2020 review of 13 studies on solitary confinement found that the practice was associated with increased probability of negative psychological effects, including self-harm and death — especially by suicide.

But, like many states, Wisconsin’s use of solitary continues.

According to DOC data, 957 people were in solitary confinement as of August, including 122 people with serious mental health illnesses such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and severe depression.

During that same time period, Waupun Correctional Institution had 144 people in solitary confinement, including 22 people with severe mental illness.

Dr. Terry Kupers, a forensic psychiatrist at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, said the practice causes “a huge amount of mental damage.”

“There's a proclivity for people who have any kind of inkling of a suicidal intention or plan for that to become more intense and compelling,” Kupers said.

In 2001, the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin sued the DOC over conditions at the supermax prison in Boscobel, now known as the Wisconsin Secure Program Facility, which was holding prisoners in long-term solitary confinement.

The federal judge overseeing the case ultimately ordered that prisoners with serious mental health illnesses be removed on an emergency basis.

David Fathi, director of the ACLU's National Prison Project, said the fact that the practice continues is alarming.

“The Wisconsin prison system should know from this case more than 20 years ago that solitary confinement of people with serious mental illness is extraordinarily dangerous,” Fathi said. “It's one of the most dangerous things you can do as a prison administrator.”

Family seeks justice, with few results

Shortly after Dean's death, his family received what remained of his belongings: some clothes, a few electronics and nine bottles of vitamins.

Notably absent were any pens or notebooks, a sign that Dean had stopped writing — one of his lifelong hobbies.

Ever since, his children and ex-wife have been lobbying to bring attention to his case.

In July, Deborah wrote to the state Department of Justice about Dean's death. A week later, she received a form letter stating that the agency decided not to take further action.

“We receive several thousand reports of civil rights violations each year,” the DOJ letter stated. “We unfortunately do not have the resources to take direct action for every report.”

Deborah also wrote to Gov. Tony Evers' office, which offered condolences but declined to provide further information, pending the outcome of DOC's investigation.

In a statement to the Journal Sentinel, Evers' spokesperson Britt Cudaback again offered condolences but deferred questions to DOC.

“It is a tragedy any time a person in the care of one of Wisconsin's correctional institutions passes away,” Cudaback wrote. However, she said, “We will continue to rely upon department leadership's professional judgment in determining what changes or modifications are necessary and when.”

Prisoner deaths are investigated internally by the DOC's Committee on Inmate and Youth Deaths, as well as local law enforcement. The DOC has concluded its investigation, according to a department spokesperson, but has not responded to a records request to release the report. The Dodge County Sheriff's Office also said its investigation is finished but declined to provide records, citing a victim's rights law.

Deborah still gets emotional when she imagines the torment her ex-husband likely felt as he sat alone in his cell.

She says her family discussed bringing Dean's grandchildren to Waupun to visit him, but they never got the chance because of the lockdown.

"He didn't deserve to die like this," she said. "No one deserves to die like this."



After months of outcry, Gov. Tony Evers and DOC move to lift restrictions and increase staff in Wisconsin prisons

Kelli Arseneau and Vanessa Swales | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | Nov. 14, 2024

As advocates continue to demand the end of lockdowns at Wisconsin's prisons, Gov. Tony Evers and Department of Corrections Secretary Kevin Carr announced plans Tuesday to begin lifting restrictions at two of the state's oldest prisons, Waupun Correctional Institution and Green Bay Correctional Institution.

The plans include opening access to more services in the prisons, reducing the prisoner population at Waupun, updating solitary confinement policies, and continuing to recruit more staff with the enticement of higher pay.

Due to security concerns in the overcrowded and understaffed facilities, Waupun Correctional Institution has been on lockdown — or what the Department of Corrections calls "a state of modified movement" — [since March](#). Green Bay Correctional Institution has been under lockdown since June.

Stanley Correctional Institution, while under fewer restrictions than the Waupun and Green Bay prisons — [is nearing a year of modified movement](#).

The Department of Corrections contends that prison officials have been gradually easing restrictions throughout the past few months. But incarcerated people, family members and [prison reform advocates say the ongoing lockdown conditions are inhumane](#), and leave people confined to a small cell, usually with another person, at nearly all hours of the day.

In recent months, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin have reported on troubling conditions inside the facilities, including [rodent infestations](#), [rampant violence](#), and [lack of access to medical care](#), as well as several deaths.

Evers' announcement Tuesday comes after the governor accompanied Carr on a visit to Waupun Correctional Institution Thursday and spoke with prison staff and people incarcerated there, according to a news release from the governor's office. He plans to visit other prisons in the coming weeks.

"I appreciated my conversations with correctional staff and people in our care last week and the opportunity to discuss the challenges facing our correctional institutions," Evers said in a statement. "We will continue to use every lever and option available to bolster staffing resources and address vacancy rates to ensure the safety of staff and people in our care while resuming critical programming."

For Dant'e Cottingham, the interim associate director of Ex-Incarcerated People Organizing, or EXPO, these changes fall short.

"While the governor's statements express a level of concern, there is a discernible gap between mere acknowledgement and a steadfast commitment to address the problem at its core," Cottingham said.

"(Evers' announcement) falls short of demonstrating a genuine commitment to eradicating torture," he added.

Prisoners will have more opportunities to leave cells

Effective Tuesday, only "visitation, personal hygiene frequency, and recreation time" will remain limited at Waupun Correctional, while Green Bay Correctional will only keep restrictions related to visitation and recreation, according to the governor.

Officials say the Waupun prison has gradually lifted some restrictions since April, and has been giving out an average of over 500 "passes" each week that allow prisoners to travel out of their cell to other areas of the prison for attorney visits, health services, psychiatry and psychology appointments and law library visits, the news release says. The prison was housing 1,005 people as of October.

The Department of Corrections states Green Bay Correctional similarly has been allowing some movement in the prison for health services, attorney meetings, chapel services, once-a-week recreation for some prisoners and "cell front educational services."

But multiple prisoners told USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin that over the past few months, they have not been able to leave their cells for meals or recreation, and are limited to one to two showers a week.

Increased pay to reduce staffing shortages

Evers cited the pay increases secured in the most recent biennial budget as a draw expected to increase staff numbers.

Wisconsin's GOP lawmakers passed a plan in June to raise pay for state employees, which would also bump up the [starting pay for correctional officers to \\$33 per hour](#).

At the start of the month, staff vacancy rates at Waupun Correctional Institution and Green Bay Correctional Institution were 54.6% and 40.9%, respectively.

The news release from the governor's office says there are hundreds of beds across several of the state's prisons that are not available due to low staffing.

At the start of the month, Waupun Correctional housed 120 more people than its 882-person capacity, while Green Bay Correctional had 234 people more than the 749 people it was designed for.

The prison system's total design capacity can accommodate 17,571 prisoners. As of Nov. 10, Wisconsin's total prison population had surpassed more than 21,830.

No more cellmates at Waupun Correctional Institution

Under Evers' direction, the Department of Corrections also plans to transition Waupun Correctional Institution to all single cells by March 1, the news release states.

The change will require about 220 people currently incarcerated at the Waupun facility to be moved to another prison.

The change aims to reduce security concerns and allow the Waupun prison to further lift lockdown restrictions.

Plan includes reducing solitary confinement

Evers and Carr also announced that DOC will update its policies on restrictive housing — also known as solitary confinement or segregation.

The updated policies will limit the use of restrictive housing as punishment for people with a serious mental health diagnosis, and will require correctional staff to make security rounds every 30 minutes in restrictive housing in an effort to ensure quick responses to any prisoners in distress, according to the news release.

DOC will also require a higher level of approval for solitary confinement longer than 120 days.

In September, the Journal Sentinel reported on the death of [Dean Hoffmann](#), a prisoner with a diagnosed mental health disorder who died by suicide while in solitary confinement at Waupun during the lockdown. [Two other deaths](#) that occurred at Waupun are currently under investigation.

At Green Bay Correctional, two suicides that occurred between 2019 and 2022 occurred in the facility's restrictive housing unit.

The agency's use of solitary confinement had been trending upward, with 957 people in solitary confinement as of August, including 122 prisoners with serious mental health illnesses such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and severe depression, according to figures from the Department of Corrections.

By the end of September, there was a dip in its use, with 923 prisoners placed in solitary confinement.

Aging prisons will be costly to upgrade

Evers acknowledged that Waupun Correctional Institution — which was built in 1851 and is the state's oldest prison — needs costly upgrades that will "likely require razing and replacing existing structures."

A DOC master plan started under former Gov. Scott Walker and completed in 2020 noted that "additional significant upgrades will be necessary in the coming years" to keep Waupun operational, he said.

But with no quick solution to reducing the state's prison population and ongoing staffing shortages, Evers is directing the Department of Corrections to "review and consider potential capital planning options," the news release states.

Evers said that the steps introduced on Thursday would hopefully act as a relief valve for the decade-long staffing pressures across Wisconsin's prisons, with his office closely monitoring these efforts and how effective they are.

If the efforts are unsuccessful in reducing the agency's vacancy rate, Evers said he would take the department's recommendations for capital project options.

Allouez Village President Jim Rafter, who has staunchly advocated for the closure of Green Bay Correctional Institution, said he appreciates the governor's steps but that more needs to be done.

"Anything short of a full closure of GBCI is woefully inadequate," Rafter said in a statement Tuesday. "The facility is a powder keg and we're hopeful that the Governor's capital planning exercise will further demonstrate that it's past time to shutter this 125-year-old facility that poses a considerable safety threat to our community."



'The screams were blood-curdling': Before Cameron Williams died at Waupun, prisoners say he begged staff for help

Drake Bentley and Vanessa Swales | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | March 20, 2024

For two months, Cameron Williams lived in solitary confinement in a tiny cell at Waupun Correctional Institution.

There, others incarcerated in the same housing unit said the 24-year-old often entertained them by talking and singing all day.

But last October, Williams began crying and begging to go to the emergency room, they said.

"The screams were blood-curdling," Robert Ward later wrote in a letter to the Journal Sentinel. "No one came to help him."

That evening, after many hours of screaming, Williams fell silent. For the next 36 hours, prisoners said, no one saw or heard from Williams, even at mealtimes, as they pleaded with correctional officers to check on him.

On the morning of Oct. 30, 2023, staff found Williams dead in his cell.

Williams is the [third of four prisoners to die](#) at the maximum-security facility in the past eight months. At the time, he was serving a three-year sentence for burglary — he'd pushed a woman to take her purse — and was potentially facing several more years on charges of assaulting prison staff.

Williams' death comes at a time when the treatment of people in Wisconsin's prisons is under close scrutiny. After the Wisconsin Department of Corrections put multiple prisons on lockdown last year, including Waupun, incarcerated people reported spending virtually 24 hours a day in tiny cells with little to no access to visitors, outdoor recreation or medical care.

Although the [restrictions](#) are gradually being lifted, incarcerated people and their advocates say the Department of Corrections has long been ill-equipped to handle the mental and physical health needs of the people in their care.

In March, more than four months after his death, the Dodge County Medical Examiner [ruled Williams' death a stroke](#) caused by "multifocal cerebral venous thrombosis," or multiple blood clots in the brain.

Dr. Diane Book, an associate professor of neurology and stroke specialist at Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin, said the warning signs of this type of stroke can vary, but the most common symptom is a progressive headache over the course of many days.

"In most cases (of strokes), the symptoms are sudden and one-sided," Book said. Williams' "is unfortunately an unusual case," she said. The type of stroke he died from is rare and hard to identify, Book said, but treatable if caught in time.

"Each death in our institutions is a tragedy, just as it is in the community," the Department of Corrections said in a statement, adding that the department "takes its obligation seriously to investigate and improve processes to prevent future deaths."

But the department has not released details or commented on the circumstances of the four deaths, citing health privacy laws.

Instead, the Journal Sentinel pieced together Williams' final days through months of letters, emails and phone calls with four people held in the same unit as him. The four men allege guards ignored their repeated pleas over two to three days to check on Williams.

“He was screaming for help but nobody came,” said Davonci Hennings. “It’s just not right how they do us inmates here.”

Four months after her son’s death, Raven Anderson is left with many questions: Could her son have been saved? How long was he dead before correctional officers realized? And who was responsible?

“This wasn’t a punishment,” Anderson said. “This was torture.”

Williams’ struggle with mental health began as a young boy

Growing up in Chicago, Williams was “good in the books” but had behavioral challenges from an early age, according to family.

Medical records reviewed by the Journal Sentinel tell the story of a “very bright” boy who loved music and dreamed of going to college to become an artist. But they also describe a troubled childhood marked by domestic violence, substance abuse, stints in juvenile detention, and a history of suicidal ideation starting as early as 9 years old.

When Williams was a teenager, Anderson said she sent him to live with family in Green Bay in hopes of giving him a fresh start. But between 2016 and 2017, Williams was hospitalized several times for suicide attempts both in Illinois and Wisconsin, records show.

During a stay at Winnebago Mental Health Institute at age 17, Williams was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and possible schizoaffective disorder. He was prescribed several medications, records show.

Although Williams' records suggest he was improving under the care of mental health professionals there, they also describe periodic outbursts at staff and intrusive thoughts about harming himself.

During one group music session, Williams was reported as saying: “When I sit by myself, my mind is rolling and my past comes up.”

A few months into his stay, the 17-year-old told staff: “I just want to go home.”

But not long after he left the facility, Williams was in trouble again. Following several misdemeanor offenses in Brown County, Williams was sentenced to two years in prison for robbing a woman of her purse in Green Bay in 2018.

Williams, then 19, told the judge: “I’m sorry that I wasted your time. I’m sorry that I didn’t take my medications.”

Despite his troubles, those incarcerated with Williams described him as bright and energetic.

“He was very funny (and) creative,” Hennings wrote in an email. “A good drawer, song writer.”

“He was a good kid, just a lil lost,” Ward wrote in a letter. “But we all are at some point.”

Over the next four years, as Williams cycled in and out of jails, prisons, and mental health facilities, he continued to struggle with his mental health, records show.

In 2021, during a stay at a mental health treatment center for prisoners, Williams kicked and threatened to spit on staff member, and hit one in the head with a bar of soap, according to a criminal complaint. He was charged in July 2023 with three counts of battery by a prisoner, a felony, and soon transferred to Waupun Correctional Institution, then in its fifth month of lockdown.

Within two months, he was dead.

Williams's health began to decline in late October, prisoners say

At Waupun, Williams was soon sent to the restrictive housing unit — also known as solitary confinement, segregation, or “the hole.”

Ward and Hennings, as well as prisoners Reginaldo Etienne and Julian Blackshear, all arrived in the unit around the same time as Williams, in September 2023. There, they said they communicated with each other primarily by calling out or looking through the small windows on their cell doors.

Dant'e Cottingham, a prison reform advocate with EXPO who spent three years in solitary confinement at a different Wisconsin maximum-security prison, explained that people in solitary kept tabs on each other primarily through sound.

While it was difficult to see more than three to four cells down, prisoners could hear one another clearly, according to Cottingham.

“It's forced on you,” he said. “You can't do anything but hear. It's so loud.”

According to Etienne, Williams started feeling unwell around Oct. 21. Etienne, who knew Williams' family outside of prison, said Williams told him he was throwing up blood, that his vision was becoming blurry and that he was losing his hearing.

By late October 2023, Williams was placed on observation, also known as suicide watch, according to Blackshear and Hennings.

But when Williams returned from suicide watch a few days later, on Oct. 27, all four men said he appeared drastically worse.

Blackshear, who said he was about eight cells away, said Williams was “discombobulated” and “slurring his words.”

Hennings, who said he lived four cells down from Williams, described his speech as “jibber jabber.”

“(We) was used to him being the center of attention, talking/singing all day ‘til (the) point we gotta tell him to be quiet,” Hennings said. “(When) he came back, he wasn’t the same Cameron.”

The men all gave their accounts of Williams' behavior to the Journal Sentinel weeks before the medical examiner's office released its finding of cerebral venous thrombosis, a rare condition.

While the most common types of strokes are caused by a blockage of an artery, a smaller percentage are caused by bleeding — and even fewer result from clots in veins. The National Institutes of Health estimates the incidence of cerebral vein thrombosis at [three to four cases per million](#) every year.

The most common causes include infection, pregnancy, certain clotting disorders and certain medications. However, the cause is not always identifiable.

“Venous thrombosis tends to behave like a chameleon. It can look like many things and many things can look like it. That's why it's a tough diagnosis,” said Book, the stroke specialist.

As with other types of strokes, symptoms can include difficulty speaking, blurred vision, confusion, decreased consciousness, seizures, nausea or vomiting, and impaired control of the body, according to Book. But the most common symptom is a progressive headache over the course of a week or longer.

“It behaves very differently than arterial stroke,” Book said. “Again, it's really a different beast.”

Regardless, people suffering any kind of stroke require immediate medical help, such as the use of blood thinner or a clot-busting drug, she said.

If treated properly, most people with cerebral vein thrombosis survive.

Prisoners say Williams begged for help, but 'nobody ever came'

The men said Williams spent the next day, Oct. 28, bursting into fits of crying and pleading for help.

Ward, who said he lived three cells down from Williams, recalled him screaming out of his door that he needed to go to the emergency room, that his head was in severe pain, and that he felt like he was dying.

Blackshear, who was farther down, said he could hear Williams shouting “medical emergency.” Eventually, other prisoners joined in, he said.

“Here at Waupun, the way to sound for medical emergencies is screaming out of our rooms so the guards can run,” Blackshear said. “But nobody ever came to see him.”

According to [Department of Corrections policy](#), security staff should contact the on-call nurse any time an incarcerated person has medical concerns. If a nurse cannot be reached, a designated supervisor should be notified. And if the person is experiencing a serious or life-threatening medical condition, they can be sent to the ER without consultation with the on-call nurse.

The Department of Corrections declined to answer questions about whether staff escalated Williams' case, per department policy..

Ion Meyn, an associate professor of law at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and former supervising attorney at the Wisconsin Innocence Project, said his experience representing incarcerated people showed him that correctional staff frequently ignore written policy.

“It’s just shocking — the kind of neglect and disregard that occurs in prison on a daily basis, regardless of whatever is written,” Meyn said. “Guards don’t follow it. They don’t.”

That night, the prisoners said, Williams fell silent.

Prisoners say they did not see or hear from Williams for more than a day

From the evening of Oct. 28 to late morning on Oct. 30 — a span of roughly 36 hours — nobody saw any movement or heard any sound from Williams’ cell, according to the four men.

During that time, they said Williams stopped responding to correctional officers.

“They kept coming to his door and asked him if he wants his meds, he don’t say nothing, and they walk off,” Hennings said. “He’s not taking his food or his (medications). Don’t you think you should say something?”

In the solitary confinement unit, food is usually offered by a correctional officer several times a day through the trap in the cell door, according to current and former incarcerated people. If the person does not get up, guards take the food with them and move on.

"Every day we kept telling the guards, 'Look, check up on him, he's probably dying in there, man.' And they'd basically say, 'Don't worry about it, he's good,'" Etienne said.

Etienne and others acknowledge that Williams complained frequently about medical issues and was not popular with guards.

"Cameron, he's an uppity person. He always talked s--- and whatever and stuff like that," Etienne said. "So, a lot of guards didn't really like him like that. But that doesn't give them a reason to excuse him or ignore him or anything."

Around 6 a.m. on Oct. 30, Hennings said a corrections officer called out to Williams and got no response.

That same officer returned an hour later to deliver breakfast, called for Williams again without a response, and left, according to Hennings.

Around 10 a.m., he said prison staff checked Williams' cell for a third and final time.

That's when staff pulled Williams' body out of his cell, Hennings said.

Etienne, Ward and Hennings said Williams' body appeared stiff and his face was ashy and puffy. Given the state of his body, the men said they question how long he was dead before he was found. Etienne believes Williams died Saturday night, more than a day before he was officially pronounced dead.

According to Etienne, Hennings and Ward, Williams' body was then left in the hallway as prisoners were served food.

"His voice be playing in my head," said Hennings, who said the experience traumatized him. "It's just driving me crazy from seeing the body."

That day, Anderson got a call from the Dodge County Sheriff's Office at her home in Chicago. She said after a series of questions confirming her identity, the detective told her: "Your son was found dead in his cell today."

Anderson still remembers the detective's matter-of-fact tone.

"You know, just like it was nothing," she said.

Critic says lack of communication from prison is 'heartbreakingly familiar'

Nearly five months later, Anderson remains troubled by the lack of transparency surrounding her son's death.

The Dodge County Medical Examiner's office and the Dodge County Sheriff's Office said they are still investigating precisely when Williams died and have given no estimate of when that investigation will be finished.

The Department of Corrections, which [conducts its own investigations into prisoner deaths](#), said its inquiry is still ongoing.

The prison's death review was completed Dec. 15 and the agency's Committee on Inmate and Youth Deaths reviewed Williams' case March 14, according to DOC spokesperson Beth Hardtke. The committee's discussions take place in closed session and its findings are not posted publicly.

The multidisciplinary committee is supposed to investigate the factors leading up to the incarcerated person's death and send recommendations for policies that need to be improved to top agency officials.

Meyn, the former Wisconsin Innocence Project supervising attorney, criticized the Department of Corrections' lack of transparency and called for outside monitoring to ensure that correctional staff are complying with laws and regulations.

"These themes unfortunately resonate and have resonated for years in terms of how prisons fail to communicate," Meyn said. "I hear these allegations and it's heartbreaking, but it's also heartbreakingly familiar."

Anderson believes her son, like many other people incarcerated in Wisconsin, was neglected and misunderstood because of his mental health disorders.

"He did have a mental illness and I don't think that they took the time to recognize that," Anderson said. "I want people that had acknowledgement of what was going on with my son to pay for that."

She has retained attorney Lonnie Story, who filed a [class action lawsuit](#) against the Department of Corrections last October alleging "cruel and unusual" conditions at Waupun.

Story is also representing the family of Dean Hoffmann, the first person to die during the lockdown at Waupun. The family filed a [lawsuit against the department](#) in February alleging that correctional staff failed to administer Hoffmann his psychiatric medications in the months leading up to his suicide.

Anderson still finds her son's death hard to accept.

For months, she said the Dodge County Medical Examiner's Office told her she could not view her son's body due to the ongoing investigation. Anderson said the office also advised her it would not be a good idea to see it, given its condition.

When the medical examiner's office released the body, Anderson couldn't afford to have it sent to Chicago.

"I wanted his body," Anderson said. "I wanted to have a real funeral for my son."

Instead, her son was cremated.

Seven years after telling a staff member at Winnebago, "I just want to go home," Williams' ashes are back in Chicago with his mom.

In a poster created for his celebration of life, Williams is bathed in sunlight, smiling as he looks off to his right. At the bottom, it simply reads: "At rest."



Dehydration, missed meds and indifferent staff: Charges detail what led to prisoner deaths at Waupun

Vanessa Swales, Laura Schulte, Drake Bentley and Ashley Luthern | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | June 5, 2024

Donald Maier desperately wanted water.

He cried out for it. He tried to drink it from a toilet. He seized.

Despite his pleas, his convulsions and his serious health history, no staff members entered a prison cell in Waupun to check on him, court records show.

Maier, 62, died Feb. 22 from probable dehydration and failure to thrive due to malnutrition, one week after prison staff began intermittently shutting off the water to prevent him from flooding his cell.

His death was ruled a homicide.

The circumstances of his death and that of three other men at Waupun Correctional Institution drew outrage Wednesday, as a [local sheriff and prosecutor announced criminal charges against nine people](#) who had been employed at the prison, including the warden, Randall Hepp.

Criticism came from all sides: the Dodge County Sheriff's Office [slammed](#) former Department of Corrections Secretary Kevin A. Carr, and Gov. Tony Evers blasted the Sheriff's Office for closing the death investigations.

The families of those who died in custody demanded more accountability, while advocates and politicians pushed for more urgent reforms and actions, including the closure of the aging prisons at Waupun and another in Green Bay.

"This isn't just a bad warden," said David Liners, executive director of WISDOM, an advocacy organization that supports those incarcerated.

"This is a bad system that needs to be overhauled," he said.

At a news conference this week, Dodge County Sheriff Dale J. Schmidt detailed what led to the deaths of [Dean Hoffmann](#), 60; [Tyshun Lemons](#), 30; [Cameron Williams](#), 24; and Maier, between June 2023 and February 2024.

Court records and information shared by Schmidt corroborated reporting by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel about the deaths of Williams, who died of a rare stroke after [repeatedly crying out for help](#), and Hoffmann, who died by suicide after prison staff failed to provide his medication regularly, as prescribed.

Three Waupun employees face charges in Williams' death. Seven prison employees, including Hepp, have been charged in the death of Maier. The DOC did not respond to questions Wednesday about Hepp's arrest and [departure from the prison's top spot as warden](#).

No charges were filed in the case of Hoffmann or Lemons, who died of an accidental fentanyl overdose.

[Hoffmann's family has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit](#) against the prison and employees there. [Lemons' family has questioned how the drugs that killed him](#) entered the prison. Schmidt said the investigation into Lemons' death showed "no concerns of staff misconduct."

The spate of deaths came as the prison dealt with chronic understaffing, lockdown conditions and a federal [investigation into a suspected drug and cell phone smuggling](#) ring by staff at the facility. The federal probe resulted in 11 state employees being placed on administrative leave, with [five later resigning or being fired](#).

The prison also had seen turnover in its leadership. Former [DOC Secretary Kevin A. Carr](#) stepped down in March. [Gov. Tony Evers appointed Jared Hoy](#), the deputy secretary, to take over as secretary last month.

Sheriff described dire conditions for prisoners: 'These people were not cared for'

Maier died Feb. 22 in a suicide observation cell where he had been placed nine days earlier, following a visit to the hospital services unit.

He was cold to the touch and rigor mortis had set in, according to court records and officials.

Schmidt, the sheriff, could barely conceal his outrage as he described Maier's death.

"'Persons in our care' is not a phrase I would use in Waupun Correctional Institution," Schmidt said, referring to the DOC's own language for prisoners.

"These people were not cared for," he said. "They're people, and they were not cared for."

Maier was found in a cell with a strong odor of bodily fluids and urine, and garbage and clutter strewn around, the sheriff said.

Maier suffered from mental health and medical conditions, and likely had only received his medications once during those nine days. Staff had described him as "not being able to ... effectively communicate his needs," a criminal complaint says.

The complaint outlined the following sequence of events:

Staff turned off water to Maier's cell Feb. 16 after he flooded it. Employees did not note the shutoff in formal records. It was unclear if anyone offered Maier other water during the other times when his water line was shut off in the following days.

Prison staff later witnessed him drinking from the toilet, speaking incoherently and making repeated statements about wanting water.

At one point, Maier told prison staff he wanted "water, water, water, all the water in the world."

His last known record of eating was Feb. 17 when staff removed an empty food tray from his cell. The next day, Maier flooded the cell again and staff shut his water off. No food was brought to Maier that day, and there are no records that Maier ate at any point after that.

Over the next four days, multiple staff members observed his condition deteriorating. As they looked into the cell, staff saw Maier appear to have a seizure and noted he was shaking and unresponsive later.

Still, no one entered his cell to check on him or tried other interventions.

On Feb. 21, a doctor tried to visit Maier but was told by staff that he refused the meeting. The doctor raised concerns over the man's frail condition, but no action was taken. Later that day, a staff member noticed the water was still off and turned it back on.

By then, Maier was on the floor of his cell.

He never got back up.

Warden Randall Hepp, other correctional staff facing felony charges

Seven people were charged in connection with Maier's death, including Hepp, who faces one count of felony misconduct in public office.

Hepp did not oversee his staff to ensure they were following directions, "which led to the demise" of the victim, according to the criminal complaint.

The complaint alleged staff was poorly trained on policies and procedures regarding missed meals, water restrictions, medication refusals, round checks and more.

During his interview with investigators, Hepp said he did not talk with staff about the policies around shutting off water to a cell and did not know that it was taught at DOC academy, either. Most of the policies were sent to staff by email.

"I think learning has been sacrificed for convenience," he told investigators.

Others facing charges include:

- Jamall Rabb Russell, 39, a correctional officer, was charged with abuse of residents of penal facilities and misconduct in public office.
- Sarah Anne Margaret Ransbottom, 35, a correctional officer, was charged with misconduct in public office.
- Jeramie Heyward Chalker, 41, a correctional sergeant, was charged with misconduct in public office.
- Alexander John Hollfelder, 31, a correctional sergeant, was charged with abuse of residents of penal facilities.
- Brandon James Fisher, 29, a correctional lieutenant, was charged with two counts of abuse of residents of penal facilities.
- Jessica Ann Hosfelt, 47, a registered nurse, was charged with abuse of residents of penal facilities.

According to the complaint, Russell was responsible for providing food trays to Maier and his actions resulted in eight of 12 meals not being consumed over four days. Russell did not follow procedures for a hunger strike, nor did he provide Maier with his medications.

Russell also was found to have skipped cell checks but signed paperwork saying he had completed them. Chalker and Ransbottom also signed their initials on paperwork indicating they had completed rounds when they had not done so.

All of those charged made their first court appearances on Wednesday after being booked into Dodge County jail. They were released on signature bonds and are expected back in court next month.

Cameron Williams' mother wants those charged to get maximum sentence

Officials provided more details about the death of Williams, which matched previous reporting in the Journal Sentinel.

The news organization had [pieced together what happened in his final weeks with information from prisoners and family members](#). Prisoners held in the same unit as [Williams said his pleas for help were ignored](#) in the days leading to his death.

Schmidt confirmed that despite multiple "medical episodes" including stumbling, collapsing while being escorted back to his cell, "loud, labored breathing," "strange behavior," and instances of being unresponsive, no medical assistance was provided, nor was any documentation reported to a supervisor.

He also detailed multiple attempts to wake Williams and numerous medical passes and hourly rounds where he did not respond — some of which the sheriff said correctional staff skipped or "simply walk(ed) down the hallway without even looking."

The sheriff said by the time prison staff finally entered Williams' cell, he had been dead for at least 12 hours.

Gwendolyn Peachey Vick, 50, a registered nurse, and Tanner Leopold, 27, a correctional sergeant, each face one count of abuse of residents of penal facilities. Fisher, a correctional lieutenant also charged in the Maier case, faces two counts of abuse of residents of penal facilities in Williams' death. They were released on signature bonds and are due back in court next month.

Vick did not speak with sheriff's investigators but told an internal investigator that Williams was a "frequent flyer," who often called for medical care. She told guards to hold off on entering his cell to see if he continued to "play possum," according to statements quoted in the criminal complaint.

"Obviously, looking back I would have made a different decision," she said, according to the complaint.

Last month, Williams' family filed [a federal civil rights lawsuit](#) against the Department of Corrections and prison officials, alleging his constitutional rights protecting against cruel and unusual process were violated.

His mother, Raven Anderson, spoke with Schmidt, the sheriff, earlier this week. Although she said she was "happy" about the charges, she wants to see those charged convicted of the crimes and sentenced to time behind bars.

The charges of abuse of residents of penal facilities and misconduct in public office are class I felonies that carry a maximum potential sentence of up to 18 months in prison and two years of extended supervision.

"I want them to get the maximum sentence," Anderson told the Journal Sentinel. "I don't want them to get a slap on the wrist."

"My son is never coming back."

Despite policy violations in Dean Hoffmann's suicide, no 'criminal activity'

Hoffmann, who had a documented history of mental health challenges, including bipolar disorder and suicidal thoughts, died by suicide on June 29, 2023.

Records obtained by Hoffmann's family and previously reviewed by the Journal Sentinel showed prison staff failed to provide his bipolar and antidepressant medications as prescribed more than three-quarters of the time in the two and a half months leading to his suicide.

At the press conference, Schmidt said between June 1 and June 20, there were three days where Hoffmann did not receive medication and seven days where he had only one of the two staff-distributed medications. Staff were not required to wear body cameras during medical passes in general population, according to Schmidt.

Schmidt said his office had to rely on medical records for their investigation. Those records showed Hoffmann's antidepressants and bipolar medications were provided by staff, including correctional officers and registered nurses, and not self-administered.

"I can't tell you if they just weren't given or the individual said 'I don't want them,'" he said.

Schmidt said Hoffmann had two other medications that he self-administered during this time and were not distributed by staff.

While in restricted housing — or solitary confinement — between June 21 and 29, Schmidt said all four medications were administered by staff. He said that it is unknown if all medications

were distributed on June 23, and additional video surveillance confirmed that "at least some medications" were not distributed on June 28.

"Documentation of medication being distributed, however, was vastly inaccurate and did not match what the video evidence of the distribution showed," Schmidt said. "They simply did not keep accurate medical records when they were distributing those medications."

He blamed the inadequate documentation on the electronic medical record system and staff bypassing reporting requirements.

"While there are policy violations, none of the policy violations in this incident rose to the level of criminal activity," he said. "The behavior by DOC officials remains concerning and it has been addressed with DOC administration."

Hoffmann's ex-wife, Deborah Hoffmann, has been frustrated by the entire investigation and said that she and her family had not been notified of Wednesday's news conference until contacted by the Journal Sentinel the day before.

"Disappointed is an understatement," Hoffmann said Tuesday. "They kept telling me to be patient and then when we met it was to tell us it was being closed. They provided us nothing along the way."

Following the press conference, Megan Kolb, Hoffmann's daughter, questioned why no charges were filed in his death.

"Because my dad's (death) is ruled as a suicide, it just feels like it's not important, and his mental health was not important," she said. "It's not important to our government or our judicial system."



Wisconsin Republicans blame Gov. Evers for state's deteriorating prison conditions, call for more oversight

Laura Schulte | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | June 6, 2024

Republicans on the state's powerful budget committee signaled interest in legislation to require more oversight of the state's prisons after [nine people who worked at Waupun Correctional Institution, including the warden, were charged](#) in connection with [two prisoners' deaths](#).

The Joint Finance Committee co-chairs also blamed Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, and his former appointee, then-Department of Corrections Secretary Kevin A. Carr, for deteriorating conditions in the state's prisons.

[Evers' administration has said in the past](#) that the governor [inherited many problems](#) in the prison system from the [prior Republican administration](#), including a [severe staffing shortage](#) and overcrowded, aging facilities, and has tried to remedy those issues.

"I'm not totally surprised that Secretary Carr resigned," Sen. Howard Marklein, R-Spring Green, said Thursday.

"I know in the Senate we had some serious concerns about his leadership in the Department of Corrections," he said. "It starts at the top, and I think we need effective leadership not just in that agency but from the governor's office as well."

[Carr stepped down earlier this year](#), telling reporters that he was retiring. Jared Hoy was appointed as the new secretary last month.

Rep. Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam, said state lawmakers are considering drafting a bill to require more oversight of the correctional system.

"But that's more of a long-term discussion," he said at a news conference Thursday before a scheduled committee meeting.

In addition, Born and other Republican lawmakers expressed interest in replacing prisons at Waupun and [Green Bay, both of which were first constructed in the 1800s](#). Born said talks about replacing both facilities had been an ongoing conversation among Republicans but stalled when presented to Evers.

"We should continue those discussions," he said. "We can run safer, more cost-effective prisons if they're more current facilities."

Britt Cudaback, Evers' spokeswoman, did not respond to those claims Thursday, but she previously provided the governor's perspective on Green Bay.

The governor "has been clear that any plan to close the Green Bay Correctional Institution must be comprehensive and considered holistically based on the needs of Wisconsin's adult corrections program" and any plans must have "broad, bipartisan support," [she said in December](#).

The troubled state correctional system is expected to remain in the political spotlight after Dodge County Sheriff Dale J. Schmidt provided details about the deaths of [Dean Hoffmann](#), 60; [Tyshun Lemons](#), 30; [Cameron Williams](#), 24; and Donald Maier, between June 2023 and February 2024.

Maier, 62, died Feb. 22 from probable dehydration and failure to thrive due to malnutrition, one week after prison staff began intermittently shutting off the water to prevent him from flooding his cell.

His death was ruled a homicide.

Seven prison employees, including former warden Randall Hepp, have been charged in the death of Maier. The DOC did not respond to questions Wednesday about Hepp's arrest and [departure from the prison's top spot as warden](#).

Three employees face charges in the death of Williams, who died of a rare stroke. Prisoners housed near Williams told the Journal Sentinel earlier this year that [his cries for help were repeatedly ignored](#). The sheriff said Williams had been dead inside his cell for at least 12 hours before staff went inside to check on him.

No charges were filed in the case of Hoffmann, who died by suicide after prison staff failed to provide his medications regularly, as prescribed, or Lemons, who died of an accidental fentanyl overdose.

Internal investigations into the deaths and a [federal investigation into smuggling allegations of contraband](#) by staff remain ongoing. The federal investigation began at the request of the DOC, which uncovered prohibited items during a sweep of housing units at Waupun.

On Wednesday, [Evers said he had directed the DOC to release a thorough public report](#) detailing its internal investigations into the deaths.

"We have an obligation to make sure that people in our care, officers and staff, and our communities are safe. And the criminal justice system must hold every wrongdoer to account," he said in a news release.