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By Joe Piette

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A plea from U.S. incarcerated: Stop killing us

Robert Divine, age 52, died Feb. 14, 2023; Steven Smith, age 38, died April 15, 2021; Courtney Salmon, age 31, died May 25, 2021; Quincy Di-Harris, age 25, died Aug. 27, 2021; Kenneth Harris, age 69, died June 7, 2023; Bass Wykeem, age 33, died Aug. 26, 2022 – they are just six of 46 people known to have died in Philadelphia county jails since 2020.



Rally for jail reform outside Philadelphia City Hall, Sept. 28, 2023. (Credit: WW Joe Piette)

There have been multiple community meetings and protests over the past three years outside Philadelphia City Hall and outside the city's four jails on State Road. Activists have criticized rodent infestations, small food portions, the use of solitary confinement, severe staffing shortages and other inhumane policies in Philadelphia jails. The Sept. 28

rally outside City Hall raised the demand that a new community oversight board must be appointed. Organized by the Abolitionist Law Center (ALC) and other groups, participants carried placards with the name, age and date of death of each person who died inside this city's jails since 2020.

After the rally, participants went inside to visit each city council member, lobbying for passage of a resolution aimed at enhancing oversight of Philadelphia's jails. It would create a nine-person board, with the council president appointing five members and the mayor selecting four. Its exact powers and duties would be detailed in a future ordinance. Funding to staff an Office of Prison Oversight would be tied to the jail system's budget. John Thompson, a former incarcerated person who now works for the ALC, told the rally: "The board should include at least two formerly incarcerated people, mental health experts and members of the community. No former correctional officers should be appointed."



Protesters hold signs naming some of incarcerated workers who died in Philadelphia County jails since 2020. (Credit: WW Joe Piette)

Activists want the City Council to hold a hearing in November, after which a two-thirds majority vote by the council would place the Office of Prison Oversight on the ballot as a question in the spring 2024 primary.

Concentration camps for the poor

Jails are where you are kept after being arrested until your trial if you cannot afford bail. Jails are populated by poor people without the funds to post bail and those denied bail by a judge. If you are found guilty and sentenced to two years or more, you are sent to a state prison.

In Philadelphia's jails, 90% of detainees are people of color. Of those jailed, 40% have a diagnosed mental illness. Ninety percent of the jailed people have not been convicted of a crime. They are awaiting trial.

Over 30,000 Philadelphians are incarcerated per year, with 4,800 incarcerated at any one time. They are suffering and pleading for basic human rights: showers, toilet paper, phone calls, meals and visits from their families. Despite the protests, the inhumane conditions have continued for years.

A PrisonLegalNews.org article in August 2022 reported: "Philadelphia's jails appear to be failing on nearly every level, from staffing and security to medical and mental health care, occupational opportunities, library and recreation time, and even the provision of the most basic human needs such as food and sanitation.

"The crisis that unfolded with the onset of the [COVID-19] pandemic in the spring of 2020 has sparked ongoing protests by the families of those incarcerated, as well as public defenders, community members, and prisoners' rights advocates. It has also caused a series of uprisings by prisoners themselves.

"Civil rights litigation over dangerous and unhygienic conditions has resulted in the city paying out over \$250,000 in partial settlements, with the money going to bail funds working to free as many people as possible from confinement in Philly jails. Litigation and criminal investigations are ongoing in the cases of prisoners murdered in a spike of deadly violence, and a federal court has appointed a special officer to oversee the city's heel-dragging efforts at reforms meant to address the issues."

Protests in dozens of cities target jail deaths

Similar protests against the deaths of loved ones inside jails have taken place in recent years outside Milwaukee County Jail, Wisconsin; San Diego Central Jail, California; Santa Rita Jail in Dublin, California; Fulton County Jail, Atlanta, Georgia; Pima County jail, Tucson, Arizona; El Paso County Jail, Texas; Walker County Jail, Jasper, Alabama; Louisville Metro Department of Corrections, Kentucky; Tangipahoa Parish, Hammond, Louisiana; Cumberland County Jail, Augusta, Maine; Allegheny County Jail, Pittsburgh; Erie County Holding Center, Buffalo, New York; Cuyahoga County Jail, Cleveland; Suffolk County Jail, Boston; and in more cities and towns across the U.S.

At a rally outside the San Diego Central Jail in July, Yusef Miller of the North County Equity and Justice Coalition said: "Most people have lost their life pretrial in these jails. They haven't had their first day in court, which means in our system they died innocent." (nbcсандiego.com, July 26)

“Because a person is sick ... that doesn’t mean that they should receive a death sentence, and that’s what’s happening here,” said Norma Nelson, whose brother Donald suffered a diabetic seizure, got into a fight and was killed in a cell just two hours after arriving at the Santa Rita Jail. She said: “People who are in need of medical, mental health care, behavioral health care — they’re just not getting it here.” (cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco, Apr. 1)

Responding to a report from the Milwaukee County Sheriff’s Office highlighting jail overpopulation and staffing issues, the Milwaukee Alliance Against Racist & Political Repression said staffing isn’t the problem — the jail itself is. “There should be alternatives that are publicly funded that could provide a lot of people with mental health issues the services they require and deserve.” (Fox6now.com, Aug. 25)

“There is an astronomical death rate inside the current facility mostly due to the mismanagement of the space and programs,” said Mia Burcham, who organized a protest in Tucson, Arizona. “And we know the answer is not to build out more incarceration space.” (kold.com, Aug. 11)

At a “Stop Killing Us” rally in Augusta, Maine, Brandon Brown, formerly incarcerated at a Maine state prison, said: “There are some people that need to be away from society to get better. But I think the vast majority of people that are in prison would be better served by community alternatives.” (mwtw.com, Sept. 10, 2022)

Community activists across the U.S. have proposed various solutions to the epidemic of deaths while in county jails — including abolishing incarceration. But what do we who have loved ones behind bars do until then?

Philadelphia activists, many who are formerly incarcerated or relatives of those who died in jail, are hoping more community oversight of this city’s jails will improve the chances that anyone placed in jail will come out alive.

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