

County sued over another suicide at Santa Rita Jail

Family accuses defendants of 'deliberate indifference to (detainee's) serious, emergent medical and mental health needs'

by [Joe Dworetzky / BCN Foundation](#) /

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A federal lawsuit filed last week excoriates Alameda County, the health care company Wellpath LLC and more than two dozen individuals involved with Santa Rita Jail in Dublin for failing to prevent the suicide of a pre-trial detainee with substance abuse and mental health issues.

The suit alleges that Jonas Alexander Park, then 33, was arrested on Feb. 3, 2021, and booked into the jail in the early hours of Feb. 4. Park allegedly had a long history of mental health illness, including anxiety and bipolar disorder. He was also a drug user and suffered from opioid use disorder.

The complaint states that when he was booked, Park's intake form showed that he drank daily and used narcotics. The intake form also noted that he used drugs on Feb. 3 and that he had been using drugs daily for over a year.

The complaint alleges that Park was supposed to receive a regimen of medication and therapy to address the fact that he would be going through withdrawal. Park allegedly received medication for alcohol withdrawal but not for the opioid use.

By Feb. 7, "Park was exhibiting symptoms of opiate withdrawal, and required immediate medical care," but allegedly all he received was Gatorade.

Much of the complaint focuses on the fact that Park was confined to "restrictive housing," a category of confinement where inmates are isolated and only offered short periods of out-of-cell time. In his first five days of confinement, Park was only allowed out of his cell once.

Detainees who are in restrictive housing are supposed to be watched carefully because isolation, particularly for those with mental health issues, can exacerbate anxiety, depression and the risk of self-harm.

The complaint alleges that on Feb. 9, multiple prison personnel observed that Park was suffering from withdrawal. At 2:20 p.m., one of them saw him in his cell kneeling on the lower bunk facing away from the door but did not investigate even though at that moment, he "was in the act of attempting suicide by means of placing his weight on a ligature tied to the top bunk."

Ligature means anything that is used for tying or binding something; common examples would be a cord or a rope.

For reasons that the complaint does not explain, the ligature did not work and his attempt at suicide failed. However, he then asked a guard for a bedsheet and at 2:41 p.m. was given one. Sixteen minutes later, the guard went by the cell and found him slouched on the bottom bunk with a bedsheet wrapped around his neck. The guards tried to resuscitate him unsuccessfully.

The 54-page complaint devotes considerable attention to the history of suicide at the jail.

The complaint identifies 14 suicides at the jail between 2015 and 2019 and alleges Park's death would have been prevented if the defendants had complied with their responsibilities under the U.S. Constitution to provide adequate treatment to those detainees who suffer from mental illness.

To support its claims, the plaintiffs reference a federal investigation of the conditions at the jail.

In 2017, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice undertook a four-year investigation into whether Alameda County and its Sheriff's Office committed violations of the U.S. Constitution in the treatment of detainees housed at the jail.

In April 2021, the Justice Department concluded that "Santa Rita Jail fails to provide constitutionally adequate mental health care to prisoners with serious mental health needs, including those at risk of suicide."

The report found a number of other serious constitutional violations in the treatment of detainees.

The department cited the county's long-standing knowledge "of the deficiencies in its mental health service system and the harmful conditions at Santa Rita Jail," and noted that "the Jail subjects prisoners with serious mental illness to prolonged periods of restrictive housing under conditions that place them at a substantial risk of serious harm."

"Eleven of the 14 people who died by suicide between 2015 and 2019 were held in restrictive housing at some point," according to the department, "and half of the other instances of self-harm that we reviewed occurred while prisoners were in restrictive housing."

The department said, "as acknowledged by Jail staff, at least 20-25% of prisoners in the Jail have serious mental illness," and concluded that, "by not adequately addressing these prisoners' mental health needs, the Jail places them at significant risk of harm."

The complaint also references a 2018 class action lawsuit, "Baku v. Ahern" filed in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, that challenged the conditions at the jail.

In 2020, the court in that case certified a class of all individuals with a psychiatric disability who are or will be confined at the jail.

The parties to the class action spent more than a year negotiating a consent decree that requires substantial changes in the way the jail is run. Some of the changes are specifically designed to decrease the use of restrictive housing and to allow detainees far more out-of-cell time than had been made available in the past.

The changes, however, were no help to Park; the consent decree was signed on Aug. 25, 2021, and approved by the court on Feb. 7, 2022, almost exactly a year after Park's suicide.

The consent decree only provides injunctive relief. Class members retained the right to sue for money damages if they experienced constitutional violations while incarcerated at the jail.

The suit seeking redress for Park's death was brought by his daughter, a minor, and by his mother. They accuse the defendants of "deliberate indifference to (Park's) serious, emergent medical and mental health needs."

No answer to the complaint has yet been filed.

Editor's note: If you or somebody you know are in crisis, contact the 24-hour confidential crisis line of Contra Costa Crisis Center at 800-833-2900 or 888-678-7277, or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255, via text at 800-799-4889, chat or at [SuicidePreventionLifeline.org](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org).

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