

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2016/09/03/arizona-prison-received-warnings-weeks-before-teenagers-suicide-in-solitary-confinement-cell/>

Policy Issue Resources

close

Search

close

close

by [Julia Hettiger](#) | September 3, 2016

Even in Arizona, a state notorious for its harsh prison conditions, the case of Mariam Abdullah stands out for the extent of willful neglect she suffered, and for the tragic consequences that resulted.

Abdullah, an 18-year-old housed at Perryville Prison in Arizona, committed suicide after being placed in isolation for threatening to fight another incarcerated person. Abdullah suffered from multiple mental illnesses, and frequently had visual and auditory hallucinations.

Abdullah was arrested in June 2014 for armed robbery and was serving a three-year sentence at Perryville Prison where she was transferred to adult maximum-custody at the Lumley Unit after turning 18.

On July 19 Abdullah was found unresponsive in her cell, when she was then taken to a local hospital where she died. Her death came after the Prison Law Office, a nonprofit prison advocacy group, [wrote to the Arizona Attorney Generals Office](#) regarding Abdullah's conditions in prison.

Abdullah reported not receiving any educational programming or mental health services, which could have violated laws regarding minors in prison. Abdullah had also been denied visitations, and had not seen her mother since March. She sent in multiple health needs requests where she asked to speak to someone who could help her with her mental health, but was granted only checks at the front of her cell.

As part of her isolation, Abdullah was allotted three times a week to shower and another three times a week for recreation, but went through periods where she was neglected these privileges because of a lack of staff on duty. Abdullah needed two custody officers with her, but only one had been working.

The Prison Law Office warned the Attorney General of Arizona about Abdullah's condition in the letter they sent on June 7. Corene Kendrick, an attorney with the Prison Law Office, interviewed Abdullah on May 24 before writing the letter. During the interview, she learned of the conditions Abdullah was held in, reporting it in the letter.

Ms. Abdullah reported that she is not allowed to have books, a TV, or radio in her cell. She has colored pencils and paper that her mother bought for her through the commissary, Kendrick said in her letter. The education services she is receiving are wholly inadequate; the teacher sits at her cell door for about 10 minutes and talks to her, but does not leave worksheets or workbooks.

Kendrick described Abdullah as sad and traumatized from her experiences, with her conditions being worse than what many adults face while in prison. Many of the conditions Abdullah lived in went against the ruling of the *Parson v. Ryan* case, a class-action lawsuit the Prison Law Office filed against the Arizona Department of Corrections along with the American Civil Liberties Union.

The case called for new performance standards and allowed the Prison Law office to take tours of state prisons regularly. In the letter, Kendrick stated the conditions Abdullah was held in did not comply with measures in the Maximum Custody Outcome Measures and detailed many of the hardships Abdullah faced. Ultimately, she called for compliance and change.

We ask that Ms. Abdullah be immediately removed from the severe isolation she is being subjected to at the Minors Unit; that she be provided at a bare minimum the out-of-cell time mandated for SMI adults under the Stipulation; that clinical staff immediately evaluate her for placement in an inpatient unit where her serious mental health conditions can be properly treated; and that she be stabilized at such a unit and returned to a general population unit rather than maximum custody using a custody override if necessary, Kendrick wrote in the letter.

Less than six weeks later, still in solitary confinement, Abdullah took her own life.

Julia Hettiger is a writer and communications professional from El Paso, Texas. She has an MFA in Writing for Children and is

passionate about the power of storytelling.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

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October 25, 2022

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by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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I hate to say this but, if she was a transgender (mtf) she would have received *much more* attention and probably still be alive. That's the true meaning of human life in our society, nothing but politics and money.

Great piece! We had a similar response: What happened to Mariam Abdullah and Rebecca Maher? Just another death in custody <http://www.womeninandbeyond.org/?p=20383>

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