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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | November 4, 2010

There will be no charges brought against prison officials in the suspicious death last year of an inmate in solitary confinement at Maine State Prisons supermax unit, the state Attorney Generals office announced last week. We are reprinting here the better part of an article on the subject from the *Portland Phoenix* by Lance Tapley, who is known for his [expose of abuses in the supermax unit](#), and who [reported earlier this year on the death of Victor Valdez](#). Maine has an active grassroots movement challenging prison conditions in general and solitary confinement in particular, and prisoner advocates say they will not let the decision rest.

Critics of the states prison system will press for an independent investigation after expressing dismay with the attorney generals long-delayed conclusion October 28 that Maine State Prison inmate Victor Valdez died last November from a natural death. Prisoners had reported Valdez suffered beatings from guards and withheld medical care.

Deputy Attorney General William Stokes said he found no evidence that foul play occurred, suggesting instead Valdezs death was brought about by some very serious medical conditions. A 52-year-old immigrant from the Dominican Republic serving a four-year sentence for assault, Valdez had heart and lung problems and his kidneys had failed.

Stokes released only a brief statement with his conclusion, which was based on a state police investigation. The *Phoenix* requested an interview with him, but he responded that he had never given an interview to explain why there is no evidence of a homicide.

David Bidler, of the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (M-PAC), decried the lack of transparency involving the states investigation. His group will meet to discuss what kind of probe it will request, but one possibility is a federal civil-rights investigation. And M-PAC is considering filing Freedom of Access Act requests for government documents related to Valdezs death. The law allows investigative records to be released under certain conditions.

Stokes said, however, that the medical records piece of this investigation is the bulk of it, consisting of at least a four-inch-thick stack of documents. Medical records are generally excluded from having to be produced in response to Freedom of Access requests.

The state police investigation was launched after demands by the prisoner advocates, who had received letters from inmates describing physical abuse of Valdez. Some claimed guards forced him to sign documents refusing kidney dialysis treatments, which he needed three times a week at the Damariscotta hospital.

Soon after Valdez had been taken by guards to the prison solitary-confinement Special Management Unit or supermax on November 19, 2009, for disobeying orders, a prisoner had written Judy Garvey, another M-PAC member, that Valdezs life was in danger. She immediately notified authorities, but Valdez died on November 27.

No autopsy was performed, and his body was quickly cremated. The Corrections Department also has refused to release details about Valdezs treatment and death, citing the confidentiality of medical records.

For commentary on this story, see [this recent piece](#) by former Maine State Prison chaplain Stan Moody, who concludes:



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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Thank you Lord Jesus we have Chaplain Stan Moody representing You
The War Widows

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