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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/06/06/mentally-ill-inmate-starves-to-death-in-utah-jail/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | June 6, 2011

The [Salt Lake City Tribune](#) reports that a young prisoner who apparently suffered from serious mental illness died of starvation and dehydration after spending four months in the Salt Lake County Jail, much of them in solitary confinement. Carlos Umana, 20, weighed at 180 pounds when he entered the jail in October 2010; when he died on February 27, he weighed just 77 pounds. Tests showed that none of his prescribed psychiatric drugs were in his system at the time of his death.

As a teenager, Umana was diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. According to the *Tribune*, his mother, Tammy Martinez, said that Umana had stopped taking his medication in the fall. Then he started hearing voices and thinking people was poisoning him, Martinez said. Umana was so concerned about people poisoning him, she said, that he started preparing all his own food.

On October 26, Umana stabbed his mother's boyfriend, who was preparing a meal in her kitchen; he later told the police that he believed the man was going to kill him. He was charged with first-degree felony attempted murder and held in the county jail. The *Tribune* describes what happened next:

Martinez said within a few days of Umana's arrest, she took the jail his medications. Jail staff wouldn't take the pills, but did write down the prescriptions, she said.

It's not clear when Umana stopped consuming food and water. [Lt. Mike] DeNiro said Umana had been in the jail's health unit but was removed for bad behavior. DeNiro declined to elaborate.

Jail staff moved Umana to the administrative segregation unit. The unit has a higher level of security and each inmate there has a cell to himself. Each cell has a drinking fountain and meals are provided to the inmates.

Martinez said she saw her son a few days after Christmas. Then Umana lost his visiting privileges due to misbehavior. Martinez said she has never been told what her son did wrong.

On Jan. 20, staff decided to return Umana to the health unit. DeNiro said Umana's refusal to consume food or water was just one reason for the move. DeNiro again declined to elaborate, but he did say that prior to 2008, a patient with Umana's problems would have been moved to a hospital. In 2008, the jail opened an acute care unit in its own health ward.

On Feb. 8, Martinez said, a female jail employee called her to say Umana was refusing to eat and had taken only two showers since his arrival at the jail. According to Martinez, the woman purchased phentermine pills said jail staff were having a meeting that day to decide what to do.

Martinez was allowed to see her son three days later. From the other side of the protective glass, Martinez said she could tell Umana was in trouble. He was thin, his eyes were sunken and he had trouble holding up his head. He said something about the water in the jail being too hot.

He says, Mom, I need to get out of here. I won't make it in here, Martinez recalled.

The woman jail employee called Martinez the next day to ask how the visit went. Martinez told her Umana was not well. Martinez said she assumed the jail would take care of the problem. Meanwhile, Umana's court case was delayed while the judge and the attorneys waited for results from a mental health professional about whether Umana was competent to stand trial. The results of that review have not been made public.

The last time Carlos Umana was seen with food was five days before his death, and even then he was only picking at his meal, according to a medical examiner's report Martinez's family shared with The *Tribune*. About 6 a.m. on Feb. 27, a guard performing a regular check found Umana kneeling over the toilet in his cell.

Umana did not respond to the guards' calls. When staff entered the cell, Umana was unconscious. An IV was started, he was placed on a

stretcher and staff began performing CPR.

At 6:42 a.m., as staff were preparing to wheel him to an ambulance, Umana was pronounced dead.

Martinez received a telephone message from someone on the jail staff telling her to call back right away to discuss her son. Martinez believed the message would be news that Umanahad made a turn for the better. When Martinez called, she couldnt believe what she was hearing when a jail employee said Umana was dead.

Postmortem tests did not find the presence of any drugs an indication Umanawas not taking medications for his mental illness. In his report, the medical examiner ruled the manner of death was natural causes due to starvation and dehydration, but the medical examiner listed Umanas mental illness as a likely contributing factor.

A few days after the story broke in the *Tribune*, the Salt Lake County Sheriff [told the paper](#) that the jail would be revising its policies on when to commence forcefully feeding or medicating inmates. No legal action had been taken.



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](#).

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.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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I have a similar issue. My son, who is 19, is in jail in Tooele. He has been there for 5 months while waiting for sentencing. During that 5 months he was receiving his medication. Now that he has been sentenced to another 7 months they are no longer giving him his meds. We spoke with him a couple of times earlier this week. We know that the psychosis is kicking in. And because hes an adult no one wants to talk to us. Its not that he doesnt want the meds, hes been asking for them. I dont understand what their problem is.

Yeah thats basically hell on earth. An actual real hell. Starvation, confinement, ignored cries for help. And for a mentally ill person. Schizophrenia sucks, but nobody deserves to be nailed to a cross and left to die over a period of several months like this. Utah is really one sadistic place, in terms of prison.

No excuse for the jail staff. They need to take charges directly against them for murder.

if this would of happened to one of your son wouldnt you be mad

I think its sad that they new that he was,nt eating why didnt they feed him threw a tube or made sure he was takeing his medication.he was a young kid that needed help that kid was dead for three days and the jail didnt know.Ive been in jail and they do body counts where you have to stand up.They didnt even check to see if he was sick.or why he wasnt eating she got 140.00 it wasnt more than that for her sons life.Is this the way the state works

@Bonnie, the man only weighed 77 pounds after losing over 100 pounds in 3 monthstheres no way on Gods green earth that anyone who looked at him didnt recognize the severity of his situation. The jail was simply trying to cut corners and save money. There was absolutely no excuse for this mans death.

There must be criminal charges of murder.

Although I agree that this is a terrible tragedy, I can honestly say I understand why the jail was not held accountable. First of all, the man

refused to take his medication prior to being sent to jail. Had something been done at that time maybe he would not have stabbed the mothers boyfriend and ended up in jail at all. If his mother could not convince him herself to take his medication and eat, what makes anyone think that officers in the jail would be able to do it? It does not say if he was given the medication only that none existed in his system at autopsy. Perhaps he would not take it. He was provided food and water but chose not to eat or drink. Should he have been in a psych hospital maybe, unless he was too dangerous. If he had such mental problems why did his mother not contact the prescribing Dr. immediately upon realization that he had stopped taking his meds or had him committed? Officers are trained for a lot of things but they are not health care professionals. Maybe they did not realize the severity of his condition. After all, I would think a person who was that bad would not be able to visit with someone, know who they are and communicate their paranoia, but it seems that he was able to do that as well. I just don't think a finger can be pointed solely at the jail system on this one.

Horrific! Unconscionable! This is MURDER!

I don't understand why the prison isn't charged with negligent homicide!

Please go to <http://www.slco.org> and express outrage to sheriff James Winder. The U.S. is increasingly tragic daily.

Heartbreaking and disgraceful the way in which our country is dealing with the mentally ill. This tragedy would not have happened if we took care of the needs of those with psychiatric illness the same way we do those with cancer and other diseases.

WHEN ARE WE GOING TO HOLD THESE PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE? WHEN!!!! THIS POOR FAMILY, THIS IS SO INJUST, THIS BOY WAS MENTALLY ILL!!!! HE SHOULD OF NOT BEEN THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE!!!! WHEN ARE WE GOING TO DO SOMETHING!!!! THIS IS MORE THAN DISTURBING, SO THEY WILL CHANGE THE WAYS THEY DO THINGS, CLOSE IT DOWN!!!! HE WILL NOT COME BACK AND HIS MOTHER WILL NEVER BE THE SAME!!!! I HOPE THEY BRING CHARGES ON THEM

This is so preventable, it is criminal to allow this to happen in the USA. We are better than this when it comes to human rights and incarceration of our prisoners. Solitary confinement is most inappropriate for county jails and prisons that aren't staffed or set up to handle the workload required AND the training, the medical care, the mental health care and the prudent uses of force when necessary. This is shameful correctional practices and not according to how we are trained to do the job.

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