

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/alabama-man-dies-in-overheated-prison-cell/>

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An Alabama prison cell

Tommy Lee Rutledge, 44, died of hyperthermia on December 7 when his core body temperature rose to 109 degrees after his cell at Donaldson Prison in Bessemer, Alabama, overheated to more than 100 degrees.

The Montgomery Advertiser [reported](#) on Friday that the Alabama Department of Corrections refused to answer questions about Mr. Rutledge's death, including how temperatures in Mr. Rutledge's cell in the prison's mental health ward soared past 100 degrees when it was 31 degrees that night.

Mr. Rutledge was initially sentenced to life in prison without parole for a crime that happened when he was 17. EJI challenged the constitutionality of such sentences for children and in 2012 won a [ban on mandatory life-without-parole sentences for children](#) at the Supreme Court. EJI lawyers successfully represented Mr. Rutledge in resentencing proceedings and he was given a new sentence. He would have been eligible for parole in three years.

Mr. Rutledge, who struggled with serious mental illness, spent most of his incarceration in solitary confinement. His autopsy report indicates that another incarcerated man was the last person to see him alive at around 6 pm on December 7. Two hours later, the same man saw that Mr. Rutledge was unresponsive and alerted medical staff.

Mr. Rutledge was found sitting near the window of his cell with his head facing the window, trying to get cooler air, the Advertiser reported. He was pronounced dead in the prison infirmary at 9:13 pm.

An investigator with the corrections department's Intelligence and Investigations unit told the medical examiner's office that, once the heat is turned on, the temperature in each cell cannot be adjusted, so Mr. Rutledge had no way to regulate the temperature in his cell. Men incarcerated on the mental health ward never leave their cells, the investigator said; they eat and bathe in their cells.

Confining a mentally ill prisoner in an overheated isolation cell until they suffer a prolonged and inhumane death is a tragic consequence of the culture of indifference by state officials concerning Alabama's prisons.

On December 9, two days after Mr. Rutledge's death, the U.S. Department of Justice filed an unprecedented [civil rights complaint](#) against the State of Alabama alleging that the state's indifference to the systemic problems in Alabama's prisons for men violates the Constitution.

The department alleges that since April 2019, when it notified Alabama's governor that the state's prisoners are housed in [unconstitutional conditions](#), Alabama has failed or refused to correct these conditions.

The lack of accountability and culture of indifference and impunity within the Alabama Department of Corrections has left Alabama prisoners daily to endure a high risk of death, physical violence, and sexual abuse, the complaint says.

According to EJI senior attorney Charlotte Morrison, Each month we receive hundreds of calls and letters from prisoners and their families about life-threatening conditions in state prisons. They call us after their calls to the warden and prison leadership go unanswered. State officials frequently acknowledge problems but have failed to respond with the urgency and critical attention to management and leadership that is desperately needed. As a result people like Tommy Rutledge are killed. This is one of many tragedies playing out in Alabama's prisons daily and the state's failure to respond is not only unconstitutional but it is immoral.

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He died in a 101-degree Alabama prison cell with a 109 body temperature. Officials have no answers.

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