

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/01/04/dying-in-cell-40/>

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

Twenty-three-year-old Ashley Ellis wasn't officially in solitary confinement, but she was alone in her one-person cell when she died last August at Northwest State Correctional Facility in Swanton, Vermont. She had failed to receive the common over-the-counter supplement she needed for a life-threatening condition, despite having begged for it so often that the guards were calling her potassium girl. The nonprofit news site [VTDigger.com](#) recently released a scathing two-part investigative series on the scandal, which stands as an indictment of privatized prison health care.

Ashley Ellis misdemeanor arrest turned into a death sentence. Her crime was careless and negligent operation of a motor vehicle. On Aug. 16, less than two days after she began fulfilling a 30-day sentence at Vermont's only prison for women, she died from the careless and negligent operation of a privatized, for-profit prison health care system.

It is a pretty blatant and obvious and extreme case of gross negligence, said Seth Lipschutz, supervising attorney at the Vermont Defender General's office. We figured out in a day that they killed her.

In January, when Tennessee-based Prison Health Services (PHS) leaves Vermont under a cloud, the state plans to hire the fifth private company in 14 years to run its inmate health care system. The contract under consideration will be expanded to absorb mental health functions.

Vermont's serial contracts with for-profit corporations follow a nationwide pattern: Oversight is flawed, prisoner care is stingy, contractors are indifferent to or insulated from lawsuits, and states switch providers when trouble hits. Meanwhile, a fundamental conflict remains: A for-profit system thrives by cutting costs and services, while sound inmate and public health care principles demand that careful medicine comes first.

The tragic death of Ashley Ellis throws the nature of this conflict into sharp relief.

You can read the full at these links: [Part I](#), [Part II](#).

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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