

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/prison-guards-stood-by-while-mentally-ill-inmate-hanged-himself/>

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09.07.17

Officers in the isolation-segregation unit at Smith State Prison in South Georgia watched and waited as Richard Tavera, a 24-year-old with a history of mental health problems, hanged himself in his cell. Videos recently obtained by the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) show that officers waited more than seven minutes before entering the cell that night in December 2014.

The [prison incident report](#) states that Officer John Calhoun saw Mr. Tavera attempting to hang himself by wrapping his bed sheet around the water sprinkler above his bed and the [other] end wrapped around his neck but did not enter the cell. More than five minutes later, a second officer arrived, but neither officer entered the cell.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reports that surveillance video footage shows a third officer came to the cell about 20 seconds after the second officer arrived, but only after a fourth officer arrived two minutes later did the four men finally go inside a total of seven and a half minutes after the first call.

Georgia Department of Corrections standard operating procedures require two officers to be present when a cell door is opened in the isolation-segregation unit, but none of the reports reviewed by reporters states why the door was not opened as soon as the second officer arrived.

That's the most tragic example of people following some bureaucratic rules at the expense of common sense and human life, Stephen Bright, founder of the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, told reporters. That's just the most egregious thing I think I've heard in terms of lack of accountability and lack of common sense and (concern for) human life.

Video from a handheld camera shows Mr. Tavera's body hanging limp and lifeless by the time the officers entered. They did not have the proper tool to cut him down, and it took nearly 90 seconds for them to untie the sheet. Paramedics arrived about 25 minutes after the guards entered the cell, but Mr. Tavera was pronounced dead before he could be transported to the hospital, according to the incident report.

Mr. Tavera was sentenced to three years in prison in November 2012 after he pleaded guilty to aggravated assault and robbery by intimidation after he and three other men were charged with using an offensive weapon a beer bottle to take cash and cell phones.

He had a history of mental issues, including bipolar disorder, and the day before he died, a nurse in the prison infirmary noted he was shaking and refusing to be sent back to his dormitory, so he was taken to the isolation-segregation unit.

His death is now the subject of federal lawsuits filed by his mother, Maria Arenas. The lawsuits in Georgia and Texas claim that the Georgia Department of Corrections and various employees violated Mr. Tavera's civil rights by letting him die.

This summer, a federal court [ruled](#) that mental health services in Alabama prisons are horrendously inadequate and have led to a skyrocketing suicide rate among incarcerated people after hearing evidence that included the testimony of Jamie Wallace, who told the court he received only minimal attention from mental health staff even when he was on suicide watch. Less than a month after he testified, Mr. Wallace [died by suicide](#), alone and unmonitored in his prison cell.

Officers watched Richard Tavera, a 24-year-old with a history of mental health problems, hang himself in his cell.

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