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LOCAL

Mecklenburg jail violated regulations in deaths of 2 inmates, state documents show

BY MICHAEL GORDON

UPDATED OCTOBER 13, 2021 8:18 AM



LeKisha Golightly talks about her son, Karon, who died in Mecklenburg County Jail. BY KHADEJEH NIKOUYEH



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The Mecklenburg County Jail violated state regulations designed to ensure prisoner safety in connection with the back-to-back deaths of two inmates last spring, government documents obtained by The Charlotte Observer show.

Karon Golightly of Gastonia died at the uptown detention center on the morning of May 14. Five months later, the cause of his death has not been made public. The Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office, which operates the jail, says the State Bureau of Investigation continues to investigate the case.

 This story is a subscriber exclusive

On May 22, John Devin Haley of Charlotte, 41, was found hanging below his cell window with a strip of blanket tied around his neck. Haley had a history of addiction and mental health problems when he entered the jail on April 3 and was temporarily placed on suicide watch, jail records show. The SBI is investigating his case as well.

In North Carolina, jailers are required to observe each inmate "at least twice an hour on an irregular basis, with no more than 40 minutes between rounds," according to [state regulations](#).



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From jailer firings to inmate deaths, this timeline outlines a chaotic year at Meck jail

OCTOBER 13, 2021 6:19 AM

That standard was repeatedly violated in the hours leading up to the deaths of Golightly and Haley, investigators with the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services found.

In Golightly's case, 52 minutes elapsed between the last jailer sighting of the healthy 20-year-old inmate and the discovery of him "in distress" during Golightly's visit to another inmate's cell, according to DHHS reports obtained by the Observer under the state's open records law.

Golightly died about an hour later at a nearby hospital. The state report does not say what killed Golightly or whether the improperly long gap between jailer sightings was a factor. In all, jailers failed to make some 17 required trips to Golightly's cell over the previous 24 hours.

The state also noted that a camera near Cell 14 — where Golightly collapsed — appears to have been malfunctioning on May 14 and "was unable to observe activity in and around" the cell.

When asked about the camera and other violations involving the Golightly case, the Sheriff's Office refused to comment, citing the SBI investigation. Most of the jail's report on the death, which was included in the records obtained by the Observer, had been redacted.

In all, the Observer submitted a list of more than 20 questions about the inmates' deaths to the Sheriff's Office last month, including the cause of Golightly's death and whether any personnel had been disciplined.

On Sept. 27, spokeswoman Janet Parker emailed a short statement:

“In regards to your questions, we are still waiting for the SBI to conclude their investigation. Once we have those findings, (the Sheriff’s Office) will conduct an internal investigation and address possible deficiencies at that time.”

Sheriff Garry McFadden declined several requests for comment, again citing the SBI probes.

“MCSO’s own internal investigations cannot move forward until after the SBI has completed theirs,” McFadden said in a statement to the Observer last week. “I must respect their process to keep the integrity of these investigations; for me to comment at this time would be inappropriate and premature.”

SBI spokeswoman Anjanette Grube, a former member of McFadden’s staff, said Tuesday that the investigations “remain ongoing.”

Given the lack of information provided by the Sheriff’s Office, the newly released records from the Department of Health and Human Services — which McFadden’s office received in August — offer the broadest account yet of the deaths of Golightly and Haley, including never-before-reported details from within the walls of the jail.

Golightly’s family members continue to chafe at what they describe as five months of silence from McFadden and his staff surrounding their loved one’s death.

“We have no answers ... But I don’t believe a healthy 18-year-old should go into the system and never make it home,” Kiara Wimbush, Golightly’s sister, told the Observer.

“I do believe this could have been avoided. A jail is supposed to be a place for a person to rehabilitate and get ready for the rest of their lives. I don’t think Mecklenburg County is doing a good job at that.”

LeKisha Golightly said the uncertainty still surrounding her son’s death continues to push down against the family.

“Every day is a struggle,” she said. “I’m no closer to closure now than I was the

day this happened.”

The family’s attorney, Micheal Littlejohn of Charlotte, declined comment.

CRITICAL MISSED VISITS

Meanwhile, a DHHS investigation into Haley’s suicide on May 22 also found that jail staff repeatedly failed to meet the twice-an-hour observation standard. Those violations mostly occurred between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. on the day before his death.

The single violation on May 22 occurred during the 8 a.m. hour when only one “documented supervision round” took place. In all, jailers made a dozen fewer trips to observe Haley on May 21-22 than state regulations required.

Corene Kendrick, deputy director of the National Prison Project for the American Civil Liberties Union, said those visits were vital for an inmate who was a risk to himself and others. More observations would have meant more chances to notice any warning signs in Haley’s behavior, she says.

“When a detained person has a documented and known condition that puts (him) at higher risk of harm ... that makes acts of self-harm more likely, it’s even more critical that jail staff follow the policies.”

Kendrick, who reviewed the state reports on Golightly and Haley at the Observer’s request, said the jail made serious errors in both cases.

“Those violations are all very big deals,” Kendrick said. “Policies and laws in the jail exist for a reason. Unfortunately these two deaths show what can happen if you don’t follow the rules.”

A CHAOTIC YEAR IN THE JAIL

The deaths of Golightly and Haley little more than a week apart are among a series of crises that have rocked the jail in 2021, including a resurgent coronavirus that sickened almost 115 inmates in late August.

Two weeks after Haley’s death, one of McFadden’s jailers was charged with sexually assaulting a [transgender inmate](#). The Sheriff’s Office has also fired

several others — including another detention officer accused of fighting with an inmate.

Last week, a [female detention officer](#) was fired and arrested after McFadden said she had sex with an inmate. She is at least the fifth member of McFadden's approximately 1,000-member staff terminated for misconduct since June.

On June 22, a month to the day after Haley's death, [Emerson Healy, 55, was found unresponsive](#) in his cell a day after being arrested by Charlotte Area Transit System special police on misdemeanor weapons and proof of payment charges. No cause of death has been released.

Healy's death was the 24th at the jail since 2008, including five in 2018 and three last year, according to sheriff's office data.

Golightly, a federal inmate accused of being part of [a gang](#) that robbed Charlotte-area Target stores in 2019, had been in the jail for nearly 20 months awaiting trial. On the night before his death, according to his sister, the 20-year-old held a Facetime call with his family in which his eyes had been fixed firmly on his future.

"It was our regular family video," Wimbush said. "We laughed. We giggled. Karon talked about what kind of food he wanted to eat after he got out. What kind of things he wanted to do ... How he would change his life.

"It's devastating to know that in less than 24 hours, my brother was gone."

FROM 'THE LAWN' TO A JAIL CELL

As a younger man, Devin Haley was [a University of Virginia honors](#) graduate who was among the very few students to be invited to live on what is known on campus as "[The Lawn](#)."

He returned to Charlotte to start a financial career, holding jobs at one time with Bank of America and Wells Fargo, his obituary says.

On April 3, he was arrested on a parole violation and sent back to the Mecklenburg Jail. By now, Haley's unpredictable behavior had become a matter

of public record.

Haley had been arrested in [January 2018](#) on charges of damaging federal property after prosecutors said he set fire to a car on the Blue Ridge Parkway then kicked out a window in the vehicle of the park ranger who had arrested him. At the time of his death, Haley had been jailed for 2 1/2 months.

According to notes from his health screening by Mecklenburg jail nurses on April 3, Haley “was placed on special watch at admission and put in urgent request to provide mental health to inmate.” Haley was taken off special watch status a day later, records show without explaining why.

The details surrounding his death are even murkier due to conflicting jail information submitted to the state.

For example, in her report of Haley’s death to DHHS, sheriff’s Maj. Zanetta Parker said jailer Savior Jones visited Haley’s cell on May 22 at 10:38 a.m. and again at 10:55 a.m. when he found the inmate hanging and called in a medical emergency.

But a summary of Jones’ own statement sent to the state does not mention a 10:38 a.m. visit. Instead, Jones said he brought Haley breakfast at 8:15 a.m. then returned at approximately 10:50 a.m. to bring Haley his medication. That’s a gap of more than 2 1/2 hours, when state regulations require at least two visits per hour.

Gary York, a retired prison inspector for the state of Florida who investigated inmate deaths, told the Observer that the absence of any mention of a 10:38 visit in Jones’ statement may have been the byproduct of the chaos after the discovery of Haley’s body.

“The human side kicks in,” York said. “The deputy could be a little shook up and not remember everything.”

In such cases, York said, security camera footage can be a more reliable source of information. In its report on Haley’s death, the jail says “video observations” show a jailer — presumably Jones — making rounds to Haley’s cell twice in the

9 a.m. hour and three times starting at 10.

In addition, Chris Wood, the chief jail inspector for DHHS, did not note a rounds violation by the jail for the 10 a.m. hour. (DHHS declined to make Wood available for comment.)

But Kendrick, of the ACLU's prison project, described the time discrepancies revealed by the documents as "a huge red flag" that raises questions of the accuracy of the Sheriff's Office report.

The absence of a 10:38 visit to Haley's cell in the summary of Jones' statement is particularly troubling, she said, because that's a "critical detail you would not forget and would not leave out."

The Sheriff's Office declined to comment, as did the Haley family's attorney, Amanda Mingo of Charlotte.

Jones' recollection of other details from the morning appears more acute. According to the summary of his statement, Jones started his shift at 7:02 a.m. on May 22, spoke with Haley soon after and said the inmate acknowledged his presence. He brought the breakfast cart around at 8:13 a.m., but did not recall if Haley got up "to get his tray."

At 10:49 a.m., Jones began his round to go "cell to cell to get the inmates that were on meds." He said he got no response at Haley's cell. He tried to open the cell door but "the key wouldn't work."

The jailer pushed open the "food pass tray" and saw Haley hanging "below the cell window with a gray blanket tied around his neck," according to the state records.

Jones said he called in a medical emergency at 10:55 a.m., eventually made his way into the cell but was unable to loosen the blanket strip around Haley's neck. Eventually he said he was able to release the blanket from the window and called in the medical emergency a second time at 10:58.

Two other officers arrived to assist a minute later.

At 11:12 a.m., Haley died.

This story was originally published October 13, 2021 6:20 AM.



LeKisha Golightly's son Karon died in May while in custody at Mecklenburg County Jail. Five months later, jail officials have not ruled on a cause of death. However, state health officials say the jail has violated state regulations to ensure prisoner safety. *KHADEJEH NIKOUYEH* KNIKOUYEH@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM



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Michael Gordon has been the Observer's legal affairs writer since 2013. He has been an editor and reporter at the paper since 1992, occasionally writing about schools, religion, politics and sports. He spent two summers as "Bikin Mike," filing stories as he pedaled across the Carolinas.

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