

SRJ deaths gain national attention, calls for independent federal investigation

Josephine Moore, The Register-Herald, Beckley, W.Va.

Fri, February 24, 2023 at 6:39 PM MST · 12 min read

Feb. 24—When it came to sharing their stories about loved ones who died while at Southern Regional Jail (SRJ), the families of Quantez Burks and Alvis Shrewsbury shared stories with chilling similarities.

Members from the two families shared their story with a national audience Thursday during a virtual press conference hosted by the Poor People's Campaign, an organization which focuses on gaining economic justice for poor people in the U.S.

Rev. William J. Barber II, a representative with the Poor People's Campaign, said the press conference was not only to shed light on the injustices suffered by Burks and Shrewsbury while at SRJ, but also to serve as a call to action.

"We've had too many incidents throughout history where we find that when the system polices itself, that the system protects itself," said Barber, president of Repairers of the Breach and co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.

- ADVERTISEMENT -

"That's what all the call and the cry is about — reform. That's why there must be an independent federal investigation (of SRJ) with the agency that has full constitutional and congressional power to investigate, to charge, to correct, to remedy a situation like this."

Last year, 13 people died at SRJ in Beckley, a prison that is understaffed and over-crowded with inmate reports of neglect and harsh conditions. The reports have also sparked a class action lawsuit against those running the jail as well as the counties that pay to house inmates at the jail in Raleigh County.

Latasha Williams, the fiancée of Quantez Burks, said he died in SRJ on March 1, 2022, after being incarcerated for less than 48 hours.

"Around 1 p.m. (on March 1) ... I called the (Raleigh County) magistrate to get his bond. The magistrate said, 'I hate to tell you this; (Quantez) passed away last night,'" Williams said. "I threw my phone. I start crying, and me and his mom we going through it. Then I stopped, like they lying, it's somebody else 'cause I just talked to him this morning; he couldn't have been dead."

Quantez Burks entered SRJ on Feb. 28, 2022, on charges of wanton endangerment and obstructing an officer.

On Sept. 17, 2022, Miranda Smith's father, Alvis Shrewsbury, died after spending 19 days at SRJ.

In calls to family during the two and a half weeks he was at SRJ, Smith said her father told them he was being beaten by inmates who stole his food. Smith said they called the jail in hopes that Shrewsbury would receive medical attention and protection, but he did not.

"We actually got a visit, a home visit round 2:30, 3 a.m. (Sept. 18); they came to his mother's house, my grandmother's, and told her that they had taken him to Appalachian Regional Hospital, BARH in Beckley," said Smith while wearing a shirt that says #JUSTICEFORAlvis.

"And when they got him there, you know, we were thinking, thank God, he's gonna get some help. But they said he didn't make it, meaning he had already passed."

Alvis Shrewsbury entered SRJ on Aug. 29, 2022, after turning himself in on a second-offense charge of driving under the influence.

According to both families, the state offices that investigated the cause of death for Burks and Shrewsbury decided they died of natural causes. However, independent autopsies, paid for by the families, paint a different story.

In the case of Burks, Kimberly Burks, Quantez's mother, said a private autopsy determined that Quantez died of a heart attack after sustaining blunt force trauma to his body and fractured bones in his forearm and wrist along with other injuries.

Kimberly Burks said she was told by the state's pathologist that her son died of hypertensive cardiac arrest, which was ruled as a natural cause.

Burks said she has yet to receive the official report from the state medical examiners office detailing the cause of death for her son.

A second autops

Smith said her family has received the state's report for Alvis Shrewsbury, who died six and a half months after Quantez Burks.

"The chief medical examiner of Charleston, their cause of death (for Alvis Shrewsbury) was his gastrointestinal bleeding," Smith said adding that the reports also found that her father had cardiomegaly, an enlarged heart, which they ruled as an underlying cause of death.

In their independent autopsy, which was conducted after Alvis Shrewsbury's body was embalmed, Smith said the underlying cause of death was the same in both reports, but the final cause of death could not be determined as part of the independent autopsy.

Barber asked Smith if the state autopsy explained the cause of gastrointestinal bleeding in her father.

"He wasn't bleeding because of cancer or something of that nature?" Barber asked Smith.

"They did say it was a natural cause of death, but they didn't say, even in the autopsy report, that it was due to that," Smith replied.

"But your deep concern is, was these beatings and things that he was reporting to you happening and whether or not they attributed to this bleeding and causing internal bleeding," Barber said.

"I 100 percent believe so," Smith said.

She added that it was because of what happened with the Burks family that her family even sought a second autopsy for her father.

"Knowing what had happened with the Burks family was the biggest reason we wanted a second autopsy. We wanted no room for mistakes," Smith said. "We wanted them to know they were not going to be the last people to lay eyes on my dad."

Smith said the state's autopsy had several irregular findings that the independent autopsy was unable to confirm because, due to the family's burial plans, Alvis Shrewsbury was embalmed prior to his second autopsy.

"I think that a lot of the things on the (state's) chief medical examiner's autopsy report is false, such as the falling off of the bunk bed. That didn't happen. and the fact that they say that his black eye was from an old injury," she said.

Smith then held up two pictures of her father. One was a mugshot posted to the state's jail website following Alvis Shrewsbury's arrest and the second was a screenshot taken from a video call with his family after being in jail.

"As you can see here, my dad went into jail — his mugshot that they posted publicly, he has no black eye," she said. "And then later on a phone call we take this where my dad has a black eye. That's very inconsistent. They say that's an old injury. Clearly, he didn't have that black eye when he went into jail."

To hear more on what the families had to say about the deaths of Quantez Burks and Alvis Shrewsbury, the full virtual press conference can be viewed at bit.ly/41m6opc.

Barber said the Poor People's Campaign has also started a petition and sent letters to U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin and Gov. Jim Justice calling for their support of an independent federal investigation of SRJ.

The petition is available online on the Action Network website by going to bit.ly/3kkqHCZ.

"These stories are beyond compelling. These are just two of the 13 who've had people to die in the last year," Barber said. "... This must be investigated. and you don't have a video, you don't have a body camera but you have real lives and real families and tremendous pain and death and people going in ... for minor offenses. and then family members finding out, sometimes less than 24 hours, sometimes less than 24 days that a loved one is dead. Dead. Dead. and with all kinds of questions gone unanswered."

A representative with Sen. Manchin's office told The Register-Herald in an email Friday afternoon that the state's senior senator had not yet received the letter sent by the Poor People's Campaign.

Fighting for justice

Next week will make a year since the Burks family has been fighting to find answers about the death of Quantez Burks.

After being stonewalled by numerous state agencies for months, Kimberly Burks and Williams took advantage of a town hall meeting conducted by Justice in January at Tamarack in Beckley to ask the governor for answers.

In response to questions about the status of the investigation into Quantez Burks' death as well as his autopsy report and what the governor intends to do about all the other allegations of inhumane treatment at SRJ, Justice did not give specific answers.

"We have investigated and investigated, and we will continue to do whatever we got to do because with what you're saying — and I've gotta be just dead level honest — with some level of smoke there has to be some level of fire," Justice said.

He went on to point the finger at the West Virginia Department of Homeland Security (WVDHS) saying that he relies on them to report back on any issues.

"... because we have people that come back and say, 'Everything's fine.' We went back and we go again. and we'll continue to go again and again and again, until we can find the absolute whole truth and nothing but the truth," Justice said.

Despite promises from the governor that investigations are ongoing as well as calls from state legislators for independent investigations, Kimberly Burks said she feels like the community has somewhat forgotten about her son.

"We've had a hard time getting support from the community," Kimberly Burks told The Register-Herald Thursday in a separate interview after the virtual press conference. "It's like we've gotten a lot more support from — "

"Strangers and family," Williams added. "Very rarely any help from West Virginia."

To mark the one-year anniversary of Quantez Burks' death, the family is planning a rally from noon to 2 p.m. on Saturday, March 4, in Beckley.

Kimberly Burks said they've been planning the rally for months and intend to set up near the main entrance to downtown Beckley, which is across

from Sheetz and at the intersection of Robert C. Byrd Drive and Neville Street.

For those who come across their rally and know nothing of what's gone on at SRJ, Kimberly Burks said she hopes they take the time to stop and ask.

"It's just to bring awareness to it, and this is the best way we can get it done," she said.

"It's been a year and we have no answers from the state, and it don't seem like we'll get any. Anything that we can do to continue to bring this attention to it. So they don't think we just sweep it under the rug like so many other ones have. That's what we intend on doing ... I don't never want them to think that I'm going away, right? 'Cause I'm never going away."

Investigations

SRJ has been the subject of an unknown number of both state and federal investigations in the last few years.

Most recently, The Register-Herald was informed via press release that the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Criminal Investigation Division and the West Virginia State Police were investigating a stabbing that occurred inside the jail as well as the overdose of seven inmates.

These incidents both occurred in January, and no additional information has been released.

In 2022, the state made a very public show regarding an investigation into SRJ by West Virginia Department of Homeland Security (WVDHS), which also oversees the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

The investigation was prompted by several news reports, citing inmates, inmates' families and correctional officers that inmates were being denied food, water and proper medical treatment.

The findings of that investigation were released in late April 2022. In a release from the state, Justice said, "Our investigators talked with a bunch of people and pulled a bunch of records and, at the end of the day, they determined that the allegations were simply not true."

DHS Secretary Jeff Sandy was also quoted in the release saying that all reports that inmates were being treated inhumanly were lies meant to manipulate inmates' families and the media.

"Unfortunately, our interviews and review of phone calls and other records indicate that these allegations appear to be a misguided attempt by some inmates and their family and friends to use the news media to spread false and misleading information as a means of getting released," said Sandy, who headed up the investigation.

Despite his firm comments at the time the SRJ investigation was released, Justice has since expressed doubt about the internal investigation.

During a town hall event in October focused on turning voters against Amendment 2, Justice was asked about the SRJ investigation, which had since prompted a federal class action lawsuit.

Justice said he "turned the guns right on it" last year when allegations regarding inhumane conditions at SRJ were reported by media outlets.

However, he went on to say that while he trusts his appointed secretaries, the investigation was conducted by a state agency that would have reason to not want to "find something bad within their own house."

State lawmakers have also questioned the validity of the state's internal investigation.

"It is my opinion that it would be a more thorough and trusted practice to allow a third party to investigate such matters as the SRJ allegations," Sen. Rollan Roberts, R-Raleigh, told The Register-Herald via text in October. "Inherently, internal investigations are suspected as attempts to cover up inappropriate behaviors and unfollowed policies."

The Register-Herald has not been able to obtain information regarding the federal investigation and only learned of the investigation in October after a request to tour SRJ was denied by DHS.

"The federal government is in the process of investigating the facility, and the integrity of that investigation is of the utmost importance to the WV Department of Homeland Security," wrote Morgan Switzer, deputy general counsel for the WVDHS, in an email to The Register-Herald in October.

Email: jmoore@register-herald.com