

April 29, 2024

Wayne Salisbury, Jr.
RI Department of Corrections
40 Howard Avenue
Cranston, RI 02920

BY MAIL AND EMAIL

Dear Director Salisbury:

As you know, in the past three months, four incarcerated individuals have died while being held at the ACI. As organizations working for criminal justice reform and advocating for the rights of incarcerated individuals, we are deeply concerned about both the limited information that the Department has provided the families and the public about these deaths and the allegations that medical concerns raised by at least two of the individuals before their deaths were not treated with the urgency they deserved.¹

Under the circumstances, we believe it is essential that prompt steps be taken by the Department to address this situation, with the goal of promoting greater transparency and accountability in the reporting and investigation of these deaths. Those steps include the establishment of an independent investigation into these deaths.

This letter does not seek to cast blame. We fully acknowledge, as the DOC's spokesperson has noted, that your Department has no influence over the individuals brought to you for custody, and some may arrive with morbidities and health issues that are beyond your control. At the same time, we hope you would also agree that four deaths in such a short period of time in a correctional system as small as Rhode Island's is cause for great concern and warrants some proactive steps by the Department.²

In public comments, the Department has pointed to the prompt measures taken to try to resuscitate these individuals when they were found in serious medical distress, but that does not address whether health issues that they had complained about during their incarceration, or that were otherwise known to the DOC, were taken seriously enough beforehand. The lack of information that family members of the deceased have received as these investigations proceed compounds these serious concerns.

This spate of deaths cries out for action. In order to foster greater transparency, we therefore call upon you and the Department to adopt the following measures:

¹ See, e.g., "Families demand answers after recent ACI inmate deaths," Sarah Doiron, WPRI-TV, April 18, 2024; <https://www.wpri.com/news/local-news/west-bay/families-demand-answers-after-recent-aci-inmate-deaths>

² It is also worth noting that these deaths take place in the shadow of three suicides that took place at the ACI in the short course of three months last year.

- The Department should support an independent investigation into these recent deaths, as well as last year's string of suicides. This should include a close examination of the medical treatment and responses provided by medical staff and corrections officials during the prisoners' time at the ACI, and recommendations for improvement. Such an investigation and ensuing recommendations could lead to the establishment of protocols that could help avert similar deaths in the future.

- The Department should keep the families of the deceased informed regularly of the status of the investigations and provide them all relevant information as it is uncovered.

- This information should also be shared with the public in a timely manner within the constraints of legitimate confidentiality and privacy concerns. In all events, the name and age of any person who dies while in the Department's custody should be promptly released.

- To the extent allowable by law, the Department should request the Department of Health to prioritize the performance of autopsies in these deaths, and any future in-custody deaths, and publicly release the results as soon as possible.

- Policies should be in place to ensure the preservation of all recorded audio and video footage that could be relevant to a review of an individual's death.

The secrecy surrounding these deaths only breeds mistrust. While the Department's public information officer was recently quoted as saying that the media unfairly paints correctional agencies "as uncaring, callous individuals," the most direct way to counteract those impressions is by providing timely, accurate information about serious incidents like these.

We urge your careful consideration of these requests and look forward to hearing back from you about this at the earliest opportunity. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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Kimberly Kane, Assistant Medical Director
The Hon. Daniel McKee, Governor