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Lawsuit: Multiple inmates stabbed at Louisiana prison where guards were indifferent to safety

Three inmates were stabbed at a local jail run by a private prison company because staff were deliberately indifferent to their safety, a new lawsuit claims. Attorneys with the Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center and Casey Denson Law say inmates at the Madison Parish Correctional Center in Tallulah were able to attack each other repeatedly over the span of five months. They blame a lack of oversight in the prison, which is managed by North Louisiana-based LaSalle Management. Beginning in 2014, the Madison Parish Sheriff contracted with LaSalle to run the facility - one of several local jails across the state run by the company. The jail also houses sentenced prisoners with the Department of Corrections. When inmates James Murray, Latavius Paschal and Antoine Henderson arrived at the jail to await trial, the lawsuit says they were housed with belligerent DOC inmates as well as pre-trial detainees with track records of attacking newcomers. Murray was stabbed first, following "increasing tensions, attacks, and stabbings" in a unit housing both pre-trial detainees and DOC inmates, the lawsuit says. No guard ran to his aid, and he was later taken to the hospital for fear he had a punctured lung. The inmates held responsible for the stabbing "were known to present a serious risk of harm to other prisoners and detainees," the lawsuit says, but they were still housed with people awaiting trial. Even when the jail reassigned inmates to a single unit called "J-Dorm," making it pre-trial only, there were still problems, according to the complaint. The jail "held every pre-trial detainee at MPCC on one dorm without regard to age, behavioral history, custody needs, pending charge, enemies, or any special needs," the lawsuit says. "In the complete absence of any classification system for pre-trial detainees, J-Dorm became an increasingly violent unit." A group of 12 Tallulah inmates housed in J-Dorm regularly attacked those not from the area, according to the complaint. Several of these inmates "openly beat" Murray and stole his possessions after his first attack. Paschal was stabbed repeatedly with a knife, slipped in his own blood and fell to the floor, where several Tallulah inmates continued to stab him, the lawsuit says. Henderson, another inmate, had to bang on the dorm door for 15 minutes until a guard responded after he was attacked by several of the Tallulah inmates. The second time they attacked him, he was stabbed despite trying to flee the dorm. The attorneys claim LaSalle staff, at various times, were slow to respond to attacks, failed to write incident reports after altercations, bullied the inmates targeted and spent little time in violent dorms monitoring the inmates. All three men were sent to lockdown after their attacks, where they were not given the chance to exercise and artificial lights remained on 24 hours a day. Despite these conditions, the complaint says the inmates asked to be placed there to avoid J-Dorm. DOC secretary Jimmy LeBlanc, Madison Parish Sheriff Sammie Byrd and LaSalle Management are named as defendants in the lawsuit, along with more than 10 other employees at the jail. "Secretary LeBlanc, Sheriff Byrd, and all of the LaSalle employees were deliberately indifferent to the people in their care," said Elizabeth Cumming, attorney at the Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center. "They knew that the conditions they created at MPCC were fatally dangerous, but they failed to correct that danger and Mr. Paschal, Mr. Henderson and Mr. Murray were seriously injured as a result." Scott Sutterfield, a spokesperson for LaSalle, declined to comment on pending litigation. However, he said the company "is firmly committed to the health and welfare of those in our care." DOC spokesperson Ken Pastorick also declined to comment while the lawsuit remains open. Sheriff Byrd did not respond to a request for comment. The inmates were attacked after four different stabbings were reported in January and May of 2020, the lawsuit says. Pre-trial detainees and DOC inmates were housed in the same unit. Between Sept. 2020 and October 2020, three inmates died; one from complications after a fight, another from multiple stab wounds to the chest and the last from an undetermined cause. "Even though the State knows that LaSalle creates conditions that cause people to get hurt and die in prisons it operates, the State has abandoned over a quarter of the people in its custody to these dangerous facilities without oversight," Cumming said. The attorneys argue the inmates' rights to due process and equal protection were violated, among other grievances.