



Recent jail suicides highlight stubborn issue in Montana

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MISSOULA — Michayla Brilz, at once funny and troubled, in love with her children and afraid of losing them, lost her battle with despair last month.

Her struggle with prescription drugs had landed her back in the Missoula County jail. The 27-year-old woman told friends who visited her that she was terrified her two young children would be taken from her. Late at night on April 27, Brilz hanged herself.

Her suicide, along with that of 22-year-old Cory Lattin in the Cascade County jail on Wednesday, highlights a stubborn issue in Montana.

People detained in Montana's county jails kill themselves at a rate five times the national average, according to a legislative report last year.

"The ideal would be to figure out a way for every detention facility ... to make sure this stuff never happens," said Missoula County Sheriff Carl Ibsen, whose department supervises the jail.

Karl Rosston is Montana's suicide prevention coordinator and it's part of his job — a vastly frustrating part — to ensure just that.

"Was this a hanging?" he immediately asked upon hearing of Brilz's death. "Every single suicide in the jail has been a hanging."

Hangings can be prevented, Rosston said.

Montana's 48 county jails are procedural islands unto themselves, lacking mandated standards for just about everything, including suicide prevention efforts.

Last year, an interim legislative committee tried to get at the issue with a peer review program conducted by the Montana Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association. That group examined the voluntary standards at several county jails.

The results were unsettling, according to the committee report.

The program's positive aspects "do not in any way decrease staff concerns about the review programs especially in light of the suicides in county jails in 2009," it said.

Among those concerns:

— The number of jail suicides continued unabated. The report found an average of three jail suicides a year; in 2009 there were four. The state doesn't compile annual statistics, but a review of news stories in 2010 found two. In 2005, there were three in eight weeks in Ravalli County alone.

— There's no test that indicates whether sheriffs and jail staff have "a complete commitment to a zero-tolerance policy for jail suicides. This is not to say that detention staff don't care about suicides. They do care," the report noted.

"Both for the inmates and for the employees," Ibsen said, "it's a fairly traumatic thing for everybody."

— Nothing demands a "suicide profile" for inmates, which might alert staff to potential problems. Citing a national study, the report noted that "a suicide profile of Montana victims would show that v

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Family friend Barbara Christ said Brilz was “terrified” after her arrest in March, for allegedly paying a babysitter with prescription pills. “Her children were the best things on the planet ... and she told a couple of people visiting in jail that she just cannot lose them,” Christ said.

— Suicide screening standards are “minimal.” “This lack of detail has led to the use of widely differing screening instruments,” the report said.

— There’s no requirement for anti-suicide smocks or bedding, made out of material too tough to be torn into strips, or too thick to be easily twisted.

— All such standards are voluntary. Even after the peer review that recommended 30-minute cell checks, the Cascade County jail stuck to one-hour checks — after which inmate Clifford Grandbois was found hanging in his cell. In Missoula County last year, inmate Jay Brian Johnson, 47, was not discovered until about a half-hour after he’d hanged himself with a sock.

Preventing suicide in Montana’s jails, the report said, is about on par with making sure the inmates’ meals are OK.

Two years ago, then-Rep. Bob Ebinger tried to do something about it. The Livingston Democrat sponsored a bill to launch a pilot program, costing about \$434,000 over two years, to reduce the risk of jail suicides.

The bill went into the “dark hole that you never survive,” Ebinger said. Indeed, the Linda Wilson Memorial Jail Suicide Prevention Act of 2009, named for a woman who hanged herself with a telephone cord in the Custer County jail in Miles City in 2007, never emerged from the Appropriations Committee.

“It was financial,” Ebinger said last week. “It wasn’t necessarily a lack of interest” in the issue.

His bill spurred last year’s interim study of the issue, as well as an attempt by Rosston to secure grant money for the preventative smocks and blankets. Supplying them to all 48 jails would cost about \$150,000, Rosston estimated.

“Some of the smaller county jails barely have guards or cells, let alone suicide blankets,” he said.

Given the economic situation both nationally and in Montana, Rosston said he’s not optimistic.

“It’s not easy to get that kind of cash,” he said.

The Missoula Police Department is investigating Brilz’s death, which will be the subject of a mandatory inquest by a civilian coroner from another county. Details surrounding her death will be examined then.

The inquest into Johnson’s death last year found no wrongdoing on the part of jail staff. No matter what the inquest into Brilz’s death shows, jail procedures are under review, Ibsen said.

“I think it’s a continuous process, a daily thing, regardless of whether there’s an incident or not,” said Ibsen, who became sheriff in January. “The folks working down there, if they see something that would become an issue, they try to rectify it.”

After Johnson’s death, for instance, the jail discontinued use of the long orange socks that he used to kill himself.

Last year’s legislative report on jail suicides ended with a long list of possible responses by the Law and Justice Committee, much of it focusing on legislation to deal with the problem, everything from requiring the suicide clothing and bedding to mandating the development of standards such as cell checks.

Noting that there’s no money for secure mental health beds in the county jails, the committee drafted a joint resolution requesting another study examining suicides in jail and ways to prevent them. The resolution went nowhere.

Which means that, by default, the committee opted for the first option of all the ones listed in the 2010 report: “Do nothing.”