

Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (M-PAC)

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Prisoner advocacy group decries AG's ruling on death of Victor Valdez

AUGUSTA -- Prisoner advocates denounced the findings released Thursday of the Maine Attorney General's Office which concluded that alleged abuse by Maine State Prison guards was not responsible for the November 2009 death of Victor Valdez of Portland.

David Bidler, a spokesman for the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (M-PAC), said the statewide group would demand further investigation into the death of Valdez, who, according to many witness reports, was systematically abused by guards over a long period, and suffered from kidney disease that required dialysis treatments three days a week.

Only after two months of public pressure by M-PAC and other prisoner advocates did the state Attorney General's Office agree to investigate the death.

"Although we are not surprised by the state's findings, given the lack of transparency of this case from the onset, we are deeply disappointed and concerned for the welfare of other inmates in Maine," Bidler said Thursday in a prepared statement.

Bidler was also perplexed about why Stokes did not apparently review the case for not only homicide, but manslaughter, aggravated assault, or other possible charges against the prison guards.

"There are still many unanswered questions about Victor's death, and given the great deal of evidence and number of witnesses exposing the roles of both the guards and DOC officials, we ask for public support for an independent investigation into this sad case," said Judy Garvey, a spokeswoman for M-PAC.

"We need more transparency," says Garvey. "There is so much darkness surrounding the treatment of Maine prisoners, especially when they die while in state custody."

According to Deputy Attorney General William Stokes, "I have now completed

my review of the investigation into the death of Victor Valdez, including a review of his extensive medical records. I can find no evidence to suggest that the death of Mr. Valdez was the result of foul play or was otherwise suspicious. There is, in my opinion, no evidence to suggest that his death was a homicide or was anything other than a natural death, brought about by some very serious medical conditions from which he suffered.”

However, Garvey said evidence shows that Valdez suffered physical abuse by prison guards on Nov 19, 2009 leading up to his death on Nov 27, 2009. In addition to the assaults by prison staff on the day Mr. Valdez was taken to the SMU (solitary confinement), his three weekly dialysis treatments were halted after corrections officers allegedly forced him to sign a document stating he no longer wanted treatment, Garvey said.

Valdez, a non-English speaker, was last seen alive by other prisoners who said Valdez, a small man who was hard of hearing, was dragged away by guards and that tubes had been pulled from his arms and he was bleeding.

Valdez’s body was cremated shortly after his death. According to published reports, prison officials called Valdez’s mother, who does not speak fluent English. She agreed to have her son’s body cremated because it was the least expensive option available to the family. An autopsy, which advocates claim should have been standard practice, was never conducted.

Garvey said she was alerted by many other prisoners, who began frantically writing her letters before Valdez’s death, that they feared Valdez’s life was in eminent danger because of the abuse and lack of medical care. Garvey immediately notified top officials with the Maine Department of Corrections, who refused to inquire about the allegations.

“They did nothing,” Garvey said in the M-PAC statement. “Victor Valdez died a week later. There was no medical examination. They cremated his body.”

The alleged abuse and the shroud of secrecy that surrounded Valdez’s death haunts Garvey and advocates throughout Maine, who argue that too often alleged abuses by prison guards and others are not investigated. When they are, the investigators often have inherent conflicts of interest in examining the roles of other state law enforcement officials whom they might know or with whom they might have a working relationship.

For more information, visit M-PAC’s website:

www.maineprisoneradvocacy.org.

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