

TO: Professors Andrea Armstrong and Nishi Kumar
FROM: Lauren Hall
RE: “Better Know a Jail” Memo
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Evangeline Parish Jail

I. Introduction

Evangeline Parish is located in south-central Louisiana.¹ This parish is home to about 32,215 people as of 2020.² Major industries in this rural area include agriculture, oil, healthcare, an energy storage facility, and small businesses.³ The largest city is the City of Ville Platte, that serves as the axis of parish government.⁴ The Evangeline Parish Sheriff’s Office is responsible for patrolling all of Evangeline Parish, assisting with criminal investigations in towns within the Parish, and operating the Evangeline Parish Jail. Ville Platte has its own police department and operates the City Jail located next to VPPD headquarters. VPPD and EPSO leadership reported that the two agencies work together to address criminal activity in Ville Platte. This small parish has a big history of police corruption and federal investigations.⁵

II. News Coverage & Transparency

The Ville Platte Police Department and Evangeline Parish Sheriff’s Office conducted more than 900 unconstitutional arrests over a single three-year period, the U.S. Department of Justice found.⁶ The investigation found that suspects, witnesses, persons of interest, and their relatives, were strip-searched and detained for days in cells.⁷ At least thirty of these cases involved juveniles.⁸ Black residents were disproportionately affected by the investigative holds.⁹ People were jailed indefinitely without probable cause or charges, let alone access to a telephone or an attorney.¹⁰ Public defenders were not aware of the holds because many people illegally detained were never

¹ Marsha Bryant, Bryant Walker, *Welcome to Evangeline Parish*, LAGENWEB, (Evangeline was created out of lands formerly belonging to St. Landry Parish in 1910. Its name was taken from the famous poem: *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) (last updated 2/10/2021) <http://www.lagenweb.org/evangeline/>

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Sarah Childress, *Has the Justice Department Found a New Town that Preys on Its Poor?* Frontline PBS, (April 2015) <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/has-the-justice-department-found-a-new-town-that-preys-on-its-poor/>, see Michael Harriot, *Audio Interview Confirms DeJuan Guillory was Unarmed, Lying on the Ground When Cops Shot Him in the Back*, THE ROOT (Jul. 8 2017) <https://www.theroot.com/dejuan-guillory-was-unarmed-lying-on-the-ground-when-a-1796731246>

⁶ Jim Mustian, *Evangeline Parish Arrest Scandal, Civil Liberties Took Back Seat to Decades of Tradition*, THE ADVOCATE (Dec. 31, 2016) https://www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/crime_police/article_6981deec-ceb5-11e6-bacf-63ebea1d8c26.html,

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

booked.¹¹ The Department of Justice acknowledged the prevalence of this illegal confinement was staggering, raising concerns of coerced confessions.¹²

Detainees were placed in a holding cell referred to as the “bullpen” where they would sleep on concrete floor or a metal bench, with no toilets or running water, as they waited to be interrogated.¹³ Holds lasted for three days or longer, and the Sheriff’s Office would not allow persons to make calls and often threatened people with retaliation.¹⁴ The investigation included a report from 2014 in which a woman who was a witness to an armed robbery, but had no information about the crime, was taken into custody, strip-searched when menstruating, and forced to remove her tampon.¹⁵ The woman was placed in the jails general population (with men) for hours without sanitary products before being questioned by detectives.¹⁶ The current district attorney, Trent Brignac, participated in the woman’s interrogation.¹⁷ Another incident reported by the Department of Justice was, twelve-year-old Bobby Lewis, a middle school student, who was held in custody for hours without a parent or lawyer present.¹⁸ The officer, Jessica LaBorde, accused him and his friends of being thieves, selling drugs, trafficking guns, and brushed off denials.¹⁹ If he did not own up to these crimes, LaBorde threatened to confiscate his dog and throw his mother in jail.²⁰

In 2014, attorneys at the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, received a call from an FBI agent named Steve Krueger.²¹ Krueger was assisting a murder investigation in Ville Platte when he learned about investigative holds.²² Krueger was shocked by the illegality of the practice and met with Ville Platte Police Chief Neal Lartigue and his detectives to explain that the holds were unconstitutional.²³ Although the FBI alerted the issues to the Justice Department which urged the Sheriff’s Office to stop using investigative holds, but Evangeline parish continued to employ the practice for many months.²⁴ Lartigue didn’t deny the problem was widespread and insisted it passed down through generations of local law enforcement, “we never intended to violate anyone’s

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.* (this technique is known as “putting them on ice” and investigators hoped the experience would encourage cooperation).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Ian MacDougall, *How the Trump Administration Went Easy on Ville Platte Police Abuses*, ProPublica, (Last Updated Jul. 11, 2019) https://www.nola.com/news/crime_police/article_23b58cd0-5065-5e48-8356-71266c44fb01.html

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id. see also, Cheryl Hanna, Evangeline Deputy Kills Family 12-Pound Dog in Front of Child for Being “Aggressive,”* PET RESCUE REPORT (Nov 1, 2017) <https://petrescuereport.com/2017/evangeline-deputy-kills-familys-12-pound-dog-front-child-aggressive/>

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

constitutional rights.”²⁵ Lartigue compared investigative holds to an old family recipe for boudin sausage, “this went back way before my administration and any administration that I worked under here in the past 25 years. We were all trained into it.” Lartigue, at the time as a narcotics officer, would put people in jail, who, *might* have been drug users or dealers, and say “I know you ain’t got the drugs but you’re getting them from somebody. Who are you getting them from?”²⁶ If a detainee would plead innocence Lartigue would make them sit there until they decide they “wanna talk.” In 2006 he was elected the Chief of Police, a position he holds today. But the Louisiana Third Circuit Court of Appeals barred Lartigue from running for re-election because he lives outside city limits.²⁷ The Louisiana Supreme Court denied writ for Lartigue.²⁸

The Justice Department planned to negotiate a consent decree, a long-term reform plan supervised by a federal judge with local officials.²⁹ But when Attorney General Jeff Sessions took over during the Trump administration, he said there would be no consent decree because it would “be a gross federal overreach that denigrates and demoralizes police.” Instead, he put in a weak reform plan which leaves the future of policing to police there, yet Evangeline police officials say “you do what you know, and that’s all they know.”³⁰ In the agreements, a section consisted of a single short paragraph calling for a “public education effort.” To put this provision in practice, Evangeline held its first “Police and Community Together Fun Day,” an event advertised as featuring face painting, a dunking booth and “LoLo the Clown.”³¹ These federal agreements, that should be judged by an independent third party, are now self-assessments.³² According to one city official, law enforcement hasn’t stopped using arbitrary arrest and detention. The longer-term holds, the overnight holds stopped in 2016, but they are still bringing people in during the day. They are holding them with no charges and no warrants, deputies have adapted to the Justice Department probe by holding people by the roadside instead of in the jailhouse. To protect themselves, “they strong-arm people on the street,” an official said, it’s relatively easy to avoid documenting a catch-and-release-style street stop.³³

III. Jail Leadership

Sheriff Guillory took over Eddie Soileau, whose twelve years in office featured a Department of Justice investigation and massive layoffs.³⁴ Sheriff Guillory took over in 2020 who says the biggest

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Al Perry Thomas v. Neal Lartigue, et al.*, No. 2022-C-01234 (Aug. 2022).

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Office of Public Affairs, *Justice Department Reaches Agreements with the Ville Platte Police Department and the Evangeline Parish Sheriff’s Office*, THE UNITED STATES DEP’T OF JUSTICE (June 4, 2018) <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-reaches-agreements-ville-platte-police-department-and-evangeline-parish>

³⁰ Ian MacDougall, *supra* note 17.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

issue is the budget, “2.5 million dollars is just not enough.”³⁵ He wants to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the community by working with local pastors, “I’m a Christian” he said, “if you want to pray, we can pray together too.”³⁶ There is a dwindling number of officers working inside the jail of Evangeline Parish.³⁷ Guillory admits to firing and arresting three of his correctional officers after they all brought contraband into the jail.³⁸ He says that opened the lack of officers even more, but he will not compromise quantity over quality.³⁹ His goals are to provide a one-week training, versus on-the-job training, where officers can get mace certified and TASER certified.⁴⁰ There are currently twenty full-time deputy sheriffs, and ten part time deputy sheriffs.⁴¹ Evangeline Parish Jail continues to operate under Evangeline Parish County Sheriff’s Office and is fully accredited by the Louisiana Corrections Accreditation Commission and the National Commission on Correctional Health Care.⁴²

IV. Jail Characteristics

The jail is located at 200 Court Street, Ste. 100, Ville Platte, LA 70586.⁴³ This relatively small jail was built forty-four years ago and currently holds 69 inmates.⁴⁴ The majority of inmates are Black at about 54.55% and 45.45% of inmates are white.⁴⁵ Sheriff Charles Guillory says plans are in place to build a “new state of the art jail” housing over 200 inmates.⁴⁶ The new jail will house a portion of females and the rest males.⁴⁷ There will be pre-trial and DOC in inmates, and juvenile holding cells.⁴⁸ As of 2019, the budget for Evangeline Parish Jail was 373,452.25.⁴⁹ But now, the new jail will be funded through a 30–40-year bond.⁵⁰ The sheriff, through the law enforcement

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *New Evangeline Parish Sheriff Takes Office*, ACADIA’S NEWS CHANNEL (Jul. 8, 2020) <https://www.katc.com/news/evangeline-parish/new-evangeline-parish-sheriff-takes-office>

³⁷ Alece Courville, *Lack of Correctional Officers in Evangeline Parish a Growing Concern*, KLFY, (updated Aug. 20, 2022) <https://www.klfy.com/local/evangeline-parish/lack-of-correctional-officers-in-evangeline-parish-a-growing-concern/>

³⁸ *Id.*, see add info about arrests

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Evangeline Parish, Sheriff Charles Guillory <https://www.lsa.org/evangeline-parish> (Chief Criminal Deputy is Scott Fontenot, Chief of patrol is Josh Lafleur, Chief of Investigations is Captain Duane Jorden, Parish Prison Warden is Jules Lebas)

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Evangeline Parish Sheriff’s Office <https://www.evangelineparishsheriff.org/>

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ Loyola A. Armstrong Counts by Local Facilities <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ULxjn4TY1EX4T79OPA2XXk93S4qq6OnuVSMFa95iFD8/edit#gid=18676620>

⁴⁶ Alece Courville, *Evangeline Parish Plans for New ‘State-of-the-Art’ Jail with Double Capacity*, KLFY (updated August 24, 2022) <https://www.klfy.com/local/evangeline-parish/evangeline-parish-plans-for-new-state-of-the-art-jail-with-double-capacity/>

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Incarceration Transparency, Evangeline Parish <https://www.incarcerationtransparency.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Evangeline-Jail-Budget-2019.pdf>

⁵⁰ Alece Courville, *supra* note 45.

district, will own and operate the new jail.⁵¹ The police jury will allow to lease ten acres of land so the facility can have multi-purpose rooms, GED programs, substance abuse classes, and even a chapel that can also be used on some classrooms.⁵² They hope to break ground early next year.⁵³ The Evangeline Parish Jail features a video courtroom for arraignments, bond hearings, and first appearances.

V. Public Records Request & Inmate Mortality

Between 2014 and 2022 Evangeline parish jail had four deaths reported.⁵⁴ All four deaths were white men, Benjamin Berzas (35), Roger Deville (63), Nikita Thomas (33), and Eric Melton (45).⁵⁵ So far for 2022, there are no reported deaths inside the parish jail. When requesting public records, there was no push back or delay. Julie Deville was diligent and fast when handing records over.⁵⁶ Evangeline parish reports that Benjamin Berzas passed away by suicide, a couple inmates in the same cell watched him take a lot of pills and never woke up.⁵⁷ The jail reports that Roger Deville died by a heart attack the coroner confirmed.⁵⁸ Nikita Thomas died from medical issues; he began convulsing and another inmate yelled for the guard while administering CPR but was not successful.⁵⁹ The parish jail reported that Eric Melton died from cardiac arrest and diabetes.⁶⁰ Earlier that day he stated that he did not feel well, he was brought to the hospital but passed away.⁶¹ His wife subsequently brought his medicine to the hospital, but he did not have his medicine at the jail.⁶²

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ Incarceration Transparency, *supra* note 49.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ Evangeline Parish Sheriff's Office, *supra* note 43.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*