

TO: Professors Andrea Armstrong and Nishi Kumar
FROM: Nadia Kamoona
RE: “Better Know a Jail” Memo
DATE: November 28, 2023

Iberville Parish Jail

Introduction

Iberville Parish, named after the French Explorer Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, encompasses 618.72 square miles and a population of 29,506 thousand according to the 2020 Census.^{1,2} Iberville Parish hosts the cities of Plaquemine and St. Gabriel, the towns of Maringouin and White Castle, and the villages Grosse Tete and Rosedale.³ The Iberville Parish Sheriff's Department, the primary law enforcement agency in Iberville Parish, operates the Iberville Parish Jail which was originally built in 1976 and is located on Bayou Road in south Plaquemine.⁴ The Iberville Parish Jail is overseen by Warden Joseph “Pete” Edwards.⁵

Jail Characteristics

The Iberville Parish Jail has the capacity to hold 120 persons of multiple genders, and also processes persons who are detained and prior to handling bonding requirements.⁶ The jail itself is owned by the parish.⁷ The jail currently houses 95 persons, and all but seven of whom are listed as “male.”^{8,9} Just over 70 percent of the jail's population are described as being African-American. The oldest person currently being detained in the jail is 72-years-old whereas the jail also houses eight persons aged 20-years-old or younger, including six young men who are either 18-years-old or 19-years-old. Four of the seven women being detained at the jail are women of color and only one person currently detained has the listed gender of “unknown.” At least one inmate is being detained for the Department of Homeland Security. Three persons detained at Iberville Parish Jail are being held in “isolation” as opposed to being held in regular cell blocks or holding cell blocks. The population of Iberville Parish Jail is also relatively young. Approximately 11 percent of the jail's population is aged 21-years-old or younger, whereas 20-year-olds themselves constitute 24 percent of the jail's total population. 30-year-olds represent 27 percent of Iberville Parish Jail's total population. Together, persons under 40-years-old constitute approximately 57.8 percent of the total population housed at Iberville Parish Jail. People of color are disproportionately represented among the jail's population relative to the demographics of Iberville Parish itself, which according to the 2020 Census is 48.1 percent “White alone, not Hispanic or Latino” and 47.1 percent “Black or African American alone,” whereas the population of Iberville Parish Jail is over 70 percent African American.¹⁰

¹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/ibervilleparishlouisiana,la,US/PST045218>

² <https://www.louisiana.gov/local-louisiana/iberville-parish>

³ *Id.*

⁴ <https://ibervillesheriff.com/departments/>

⁵ <https://www.lsa.org/iberville-parish>

⁶ <https://ibervillesheriff.com/departments/>

⁷ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t1aKOcqxHZsGSx8kYjT2BVNEj2vGTHw/view>

⁸ <http://www.iberville.lavns.org/roster.aspx>

⁹ <https://iberville-911-la.zuercherportal.com/#/inmates>

¹⁰ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/ibervilleparishlouisiana,la,US/PST045218>

Although the Iberville Parish Sheriff's office maintains a website, it contains little to no information about the jail outside of a short reference on the website's departmental page which references Warden Edwards in his official capacity as warden of the jail.¹¹ However, detailed information about each person currently being detained at Iberville Parish Jail is accessible through the "jail inmate database"¹² or LANVS.¹³ Iberville Parish Jail is located at 59605 Bayou Road in Plaquemine.¹⁴ According to Google Street View, the jail is located in an open field enclosed by chain-link fences topped with barbed wire.

According to Iberville Parish's 2021 Hazard Mitigation Plan, the jail itself had an assessed value of \$2.35 million.¹⁵ According to the Iberville Parish Sheriff's 2022 Financial Report, the jail operated a budget of just over \$20 million in 2021 and 2022.¹⁶

Structure of Iberville Sheriff Department's Administration

The Sheriff's Department is organized into different departments and leadership roles, including: the Criminal Division led by Chief Deputy Stephen Engolio; the Chief Administrator Russell Jackson; the Civil Division led by McKenzie Willie; the Detectives United led by Ronnie Hebert; the Crime Scene Unit led by Detective Lori Morgan; and Corrections/Parish Jail overseen by Warden Joseph "Pete" Edwards.¹⁷ Iberville Sheriff Brett Stassi has held that role since he was first elected sheriff in 2012.¹⁸ Sheriff Stassi ran unopposed for another four-year term in September 2023.¹⁹ Sheriff Stassi was also sworn in as the new president of the Louisiana Sheriff's Association in June 2021.²⁰ According to the Iberville Parish Sheriff's 2022 Financial Report, Stassi earned a gross income of \$182,575 and a total income of \$263,007 in gross income and benefits.²¹

Inmate Mortality & Conditions

Between February 10, 2015 and April 1, 2022, four people are reported to have died while in the custody of Iberville Parish Jail.²² According to an obituary for one of the decedents, Mr. Johtrell Joseph "Johnny" Lumar who was just 31-years-old at the time of his death at the Iberville Parish Jail.²³ In addition to the above deaths, a man linked to multiple cold case murders died in Iberville Parish Jail in December 2018.²⁴ According to a profile for Iberville Parish Jail on "Prison Handbook," people detained at the jail wake up at 6:00am, have breakfast, and thereafter work in either the kitchen, laundry, or in a manufacturing job.²⁵ Per this profile,

¹¹ <https://ibervillesheriff.com/departments/>

¹² <https://iberville-911-la.zuercherportal.com/#/inmates>

¹³ <http://www.iberville.lavns.org/roster.aspx>

¹⁴ <https://doc.louisiana.gov/location/iberville-parish/>

¹⁵ https://ibervilleparish.com/Portals/0/Documents/Iberville%20HM%20Plan%20Update%202021%20-%20With%20Resolutions%20Added_SM.pdf

¹⁶ [https://app.lla.state.la.us/PublicReports.nsf/0/157969F8EDFFF94C862588FC0058E09D/\\$FILE/00000128.pdf](https://app.lla.state.la.us/PublicReports.nsf/0/157969F8EDFFF94C862588FC0058E09D/$FILE/00000128.pdf)

¹⁷ <https://ibervillesheriff.com/departments/>

¹⁸ <https://www.postsouth.com/story/news/local/2023/06/13/iberville-parish-sheriff-brett-stassi-inducted-into-justice-hall-of-fame/70313400007/>

¹⁹ <https://www.postsouth.com/story/news/local/2023/09/05/iberville-sheriff-brett-stassi-says-body-cams-retention-top-priorities/70712976007/>

²⁰ <https://www.wafb.com/2021/06/17/iberville-parish-sheriff-brett-stassi-sworn-la-sheriffs-assoc-president/>

²¹ [https://app.lla.state.la.us/PublicReports.nsf/0/157969F8EDFFF94C862588FC0058E09D/\\$FILE/00000128.pdf](https://app.lla.state.la.us/PublicReports.nsf/0/157969F8EDFFF94C862588FC0058E09D/$FILE/00000128.pdf)

²² <https://www.incarcerationtransparency.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2021-Iberville.pdf>

²³ <https://www.lawsonandrollinspurpleshield.com/obituary/3036144>

²⁴ <https://www.wbrz.com/news/man-arrested-in-cold-case-murders-dies-in-iberville-parish-jail/>

²⁵ <https://prisonhandbook.com/2489/iberville-parish-jail-plaquemine-la/>

persons at the jail may spend their evenings, after a day of work, in their cells or in the common area.²⁶ The Iberville Parish Sheriff, Brett Stassi, is quoted in a March 29, 2014 article published by the Plaquemine Post South as saying that the parish does not need a new facility as he “never had to release anybody because it [the jail] was full...the jail is old but it is adequate.”²⁷ That said, the Iberville Parish Jail implement moderate renovations including installing new showers and air conditioning systems (as it was no longer possible to “maintain a safe jail environment” with the old AC unit).²⁸ Iberville Parish Jail is still housed in an old concrete building certain to need repairs.

According to a different guide on Iberville Parish Jail published by Barkemeyer Law Firm, Iberville Parish Jail has a commissary for goods that detained persons may want but that are not provided by the jail itself, including “hygiene products for sisters” and “writing utensils.”²⁹ Surveillance cameras have been placed in all parts of the jail except for bathing areas or cells designated for certain individuals. Security guards at the jail, who apparently use pepper spray to “stop riots in the prisons” instead of using lethal force, also “handle the medical needs of inmates.”

Cases Alleging Mistreatment at the Jail

Between 2013 and 2023, at least three plaintiffs, who themselves or a loved one have at some point been held in custody at the Iberville Parish Jail, have filed § 1983 lawsuits in state or federal court alleging that the jail neglected medical issues and denied adequate access to medical treatment, among other allegations. For example, in a § 1983 lawsuit filed by a plaintiff whose daughter committed suicide in 2008 while detained in isolation while at Iberville Parish Jail alleged, among other things, that the decedent threatened suicide to a deputy whilst she was being transported to the jail, who then relayed the threat of suicide to the jailer of Iberville Parish Jail.³⁰ Once the decedent arrived at the jail, she was placed in an isolation cell and shackled to a bench as the jailer and another deputy located items necessary to place her under formal suicide watch. As that occurred, the decedent used a belt that was obscured by her clothing (the existence of which the deputies were unaware) to hang herself from a pipe in the cell wall.³¹ Deputies left the decedent alone in an isolation room for 12 to 13 minutes before returning to the cell. Ultimately, the trial court held that the deputies conduct did not constitute “deliberate indifference” to the decedent’s safety and life, which was affirmed by the First Circuit of the Court of Appeal of Louisiana.

In another case, an incarcerated person at the Jackson Parish Jail filed a pro se complaint for civil damages naming the City of Plaquemine Police Department, Iberville Parish Sheriff’s Department and the Iberville Parish Jail alleging, in part, that he was denied medical care by the Iberville Parish Sheriff’s Department for injuries sustained to his eye after he was beaten by another person in detention during a court hearing (this case was transferred to the Middle District of Louisiana).³²

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ <https://www.postsouth.com/story/business/2014/03/29/hit-them-hard-iberville-parish/37881912007/>

²⁸ https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/communities/westside/iberville-parish-jail-to-close-during-eight-week-upgrade-prisoners-to-be-housed-elsewhere/article_336fca7a-8207-11e7-adc8-237c5c25187c.html

²⁹ <https://attorneycarl.com/iberville-parish-jail/>

³⁰ See *Patterson v. Allain*, La. App. 1 Cir, April 26, 2013.

³¹ *Id.*

³² See *Okpara K. Buggs v. City of Plaquemine Police Dept., et al.*, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, September 11, 2023.

Lastly, in a case decided by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals on June 8, 2020, the plaintiff alleged that while he was a DOC inmate housed at the Iberville Parish Jail, he suffered a stroke in November 2015 and was hospitalized; the plaintiff was subsequently discharged from the hospital and transported to Iberville Parish Jail.³³ 55 days after his discharge from the hospital, the plaintiff filed a grievance alleging inadequate medical treatment, inter alia (his claims were rejected as they were not timely submitted, though the material facts of the case were uncontested).³⁴ The above cases begin to establish a troubling pattern of behavior at the jail when considered alongside the four reported deaths at the jail between February 2015 and April 2022. There are also allegations, published by Courthouse News Service, that Iberville Sheriff Office staff sprayed a “chemical” resulting in an unnamed death at the jail in July 2013.³⁵ Additionally, according to Iberville Parish’s 2023 budget, the jail employs only one nurse (and has since at least 2020).³⁶

Media Coverage of the Jail

Local publications, including *The Advocate*, frequently cover a range of topics affecting the operations of the jail and the lives of those housed within the jail, although this coverage others persons in detention. This includes:

- An October 2019 article by *The Advocate* profiled a rehabilitation program attempting “to steer criminal offenders to sobriety.”³⁷ The article reports that “100 inmates” have entered the course since it started in Summer 2019, while also noting that “500 or so” drug arrests are effectuated in Iberville Parish each year.
- In April 2020, *The Advocate* published an article reporting that a person in Iberville Parish Jail had tested positive for COVID-19 and was being transferred to Louisiana State Penitentiary to be isolated from others.³⁸
- According to a May 2023 article published by *The Advocate*, Iberville Parish sheriff’s deputies arrested 145 juveniles from January 2022 to May 2023.³⁹ However, according to Sheriff Stassi, there is nowhere to put juveniles, “there is no juvenile detention facility in our area...our hands are tied with what we can really do with them.” The Sheriff’s office contacts a parent or guardian and works with them and the district attorney to determine whether the juvenile, *who can be between 10- and 17-years-old*, will be incarcerated. The Sheriff’s Office then looks to house the juveniles for 72 hours until their hearing, and most often sends them to facilities in either Alabama or Mississippi.
- In July 2023, local media reported on an “inmate” who had escaped from the Iberville Parish Jail in a stolen truck and their subsequent recapture.⁴⁰

³³ See *Phillips v. Green*, 814 Fed. Appx. 852 (5th Cir. 2020).

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ <https://www.courthousenews.com/jail-death-5/>

³⁶ <https://ibervilleparish.com/Portals/0/Departments/Finance/2022%20CAFR%20PDF.pdf>

³⁷ https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/communities/westside/its-life-or-death-in-this-louisiana-jail-program-that-aims-to-treat-inmates-drug/article_8230c430-f6bc-11e9-8ca1-23594edfa7ec.html

³⁸ https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/coronavirus/local-jail-inmates-who-test-positive-for-coronavirus-being-sent-to-angola-to-quarantine/article_68cd8eb0-752e-11ea-922d-4b48c675e1eb.html

³⁹ https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/juvenile-detention-facilities-in-louisiana-face-hurdles/article_cfea9348-f688-11ed-acce-73f7850e11e5.html

⁴⁰ <https://www.wafb.com/2023/07/06/inmate-custody-after-escaping-stolen-truck-deputies-say/>

Transparency at the Jail

The Iberville Sheriff's Office does not receive high marks for transparency. Virtually no email addresses actually connect you with the appropriate person, who seems to be Warden Edwards. This assumes that the email was even successfully delivered at all. Employees of the sheriff's office will not direct you to any email address and will refuse to give you basic contact information. The website includes a generic email address for the Sheriff's Office in addition to allowing users to submit an inquiry to the Sheriff's Office. However, you do not get a registered receipt for having done so, and no one replies to that message portal anyways. The Sheriff's Office posts notices of public hearings, but the most recent one is dated April 2022.⁴¹ In fairness to the Sheriff's Office, it does operate "inmate searches" that allow you to see everyone who is in detention, and lists individuals as being held in isolation. That is such a low bar to meet, though. Speaking with the staff at the Sheriff's Office feels like you are being purposefully misled.

It was also not always easy to track or identify consistent information on Iberville Parish Jail over time. Many references, including a database published in 2013 by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University, indicate that Iberville held 12 ICE detainees, 9 of whom had not been convicted of a crime in FY 2012.^{42,43} But that seems like an isolated report. There is limited information on the operations of the Iberville Parish Jail in parish budget and fiscal reports, as well as in old parish agendas that are available online, but there is not a singular source that will provide detailed information on the jail.

I only received an email address with which to correspond today. However, throughout researching for this memo, I found no evidence of oversight for the jail, which makes sense considering that it is a parish jail.

⁴¹ <https://ibervillesheriff.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Notice-of-Public-Meeting-JPEG.jpg>

⁴² <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/310/include/table1.html>

⁴³ <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/310/>

