

TO: Professors Andrea Armstrong and Nishi Kumar
FROM: Sarah Helmstetter
RE: "Better Know a Jail" Memo- St. Bernard Parish Prison
DATE: November 28, 2023

St. Bernard Parish Prison

Jail Characteristics

St. Bernard Parish Prison was formed in 1807, and is one of Louisiana's original nineteen parishes.¹ It is located at 1900 Paris Road, Chalmette, LA.² The prison was founded in and named after Chalmette, a popular associate justice at the Supreme court of Louisiana.³ St. Bernard Parish Prison is a 703-beds regional correctional facility and about 671 inmates under the supervision of over 163 staff members.⁴ The St. Bernard Parish Prison is operated by St. Bernard Parish County Sherriff, Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Federal U.S. Marshal, among other major agencies.⁵ Consequently, the prison houses local offenders and holds more than 546 federal inmates daily. The largest population of inmates here are men, with just 20% of them being women.⁶ According to their jail roster posted to LAVNS, as of today- November 27, 2023, the facility is housing 206 offenders.⁷ Of these 206 offenders, 199 are male and 17 are female. Additionally, 84 of these individuals are white, 117 are black, 1 is Asian, and there is one individual's race that is listed as unknown.

The prisons website is "https://sbso.org" but is essentially useless. The website makes it extremely difficult to navigate and seemingly has no information about the prison. If you use the search bar to type 'prison' the only things that come up are articles on arrest the officers have made.⁸ Additionally, most google searches of the prison bring you to pages that have a link to a supposed St. Bernard Parish Prison page, but when you click on the link it brings you to an "Error" page.⁹

Jail Leadership

Sheriff James Pohlmann currently serves as St. Bernard Parish's Sheriff and has worked at the St. Bernard Parish's Office since 1983.¹⁰ He is a native of St. Bernard Parish and was elected in November 2011 after he served as Chief Deputy to then Sheriff Jack A. Stephens since

¹ "History and Facts of Louisiana Parishes" MyCounties, 26 November 2023, <https://mycounties.com/louisiana/>

² "At. Bernard Parish Prisons, LA Inmate Search, Prison Roster, Visitation" CalhounSCSheriff, 26 November 2023, <https://calhounscsheriff.com/louisiana/county-jail/st-bernard-parish-prison/>

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ "St. Bernard Parish Office Jail Roster" LAVNS, 27 November 2023, <http://www.stbernard.lavns.org/roster.aspx>

⁸ St. Bernard Sheriff's Office, 26, November 2023, <https://sbso.org/?s=prison>

⁹ St. Bernard Sheriff's Office, 26, November 2023, <https://sbso.org/Departments/Corrections/tabid/89/Default.aspx>

¹⁰ "About SBSO." St. Bernard Parish Sheriff's Office, 25 November 2023, <https://sbso.org/about/>

2008.¹¹ He has been re-elected unopposed twice since his first term, and if he chooses to run again, will be up for re-election in 2024.¹² Sheriff Pohlmann appears to have done great things for the parish, but has also allowed little information regarding the prison and his officer be known to the public. Just about every time he is asked about a “scandal,” he chooses not to partake in conversation about incidents occurring at his facilities due to “pending litigation.”¹³ However, I was unable to ascertain any of the pending litigation he refers to. There do not appear to be any claims against the prison or the sheriff listed on DocketBird pertaining to the incidents he refers to. The sheriff has a duty to be transparent to the public in regard to the facilities he runs and the individuals he employs. He claims that prior deaths have made him recognize the importance of medical expenses in jails, so the parish government has put a package together for \$700,000 to go to these expenses.¹⁴ However, this number is not reflected on the parish’s actual budget, so it is unclear if this package was only in place for the time being since it never seemed to have been adopted.¹⁵

In 2019, Sheriff James Pohlmann settled for \$200,000 in a lawsuit brought by a teenage girl who claimed she subjected to sexual abuse while inside a SBP facility.¹⁶ The officer remained employed by the St. Bernard Sheriff’s Office and the claimed to be conducting their own investigation of the matter. Additionally, no outside sources (such as the FBI) never stepped in and conducted an interview of their own.¹⁷ The Sheriff did not make any statements on this matter “due to pending litigation.”

Public Records and Inmate Mortality

St. Bernard Parish Prison makes it extremely difficult for the public to find any information regarding their facility. LA-DOC has not audited this prison and has limited information on their website- only listing the prison’s contact information and location.¹⁸ After searching the parish’s sheriff’s office, clerk of court, and government websites, I found no ascertainable information regarding the conditions of the facility. Currently, there are two individuals that are known to have died while in custody at this facility, Jamin Muscarello and

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Killion, Aubry. “WDSU Investigates: Videos show final hours of St. Bernard woman who died in jail without her medication.” WDSU, 26 November 2023, <https://www.wdsu.com/article/wdsu-investigates-videos-show-final-hours-of-st-bernard-woman-who-died-in-jail-without-her-medication/35470942>

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ “2023 Adopted Operating & Capital Budget” 26, November 2023, <https://www.sbsp.net/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/1786>

¹⁶ Sledge, Matt. “St. Bernard sheriff pays out \$200K in sex abuse claim against deputy, who remains on staff” NOLA.com, 26 November 2023, https://www.nola.com/news/courts/st-bernard-sheriff-pays-out-200k-in-sex-abuse-claim-against-deputy-who-remains-on/article_acdcb5b9-4f20-54a4-8391-775bcf6f6499.html

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ “St. Bernard Parish” LA DPS&C, 26 November 2023, <https://doc.louisiana.gov/location/st-bernard-parish/>

Nimali Henry.¹⁹ Unfortunately, there is little information regarding Jamin Muscarello's death. Jamin was admitted into the facility on July 20, 1999, for a Schedule II drug offense, and died on November 16, 2017 (seemingly) due to a 'illness' in a medical facility outside of the prison. Jamin's death records do not state a cause of death, time of death, or the location of incident, so we do not know how this occurred.²⁰ Additional google searches and LexusNexus Public Records searches revealed no further information regarding the matter.

However, I did find several online articles discussing a tragic death of Nimali Henry that occurred in the facility in 2014. On March 21, 2014, Nimali Henry was arrested after attempting to retrieve her child from a residence.²¹ Although it was her first run in with the law, her bond was set at \$25,000.²² Her family and friends were unable to pay her bond, so Nimali had no choice but to remain at the facility until they could find the money or until she could have her day in court. Unfortunately, neither of those things happened. Nimali's sister, Deshawna Henry, made multiple attempts to contact St. Bernard Parish's Prison facility in order to inform them of Nimali's rare blood condition and other serious medical needs.²³ She was met with no assistance but continued the attempts, nonetheless. After ten days, on April 1, 2014, prison officials contacted Deshawna and informed her that her sister had passed away while inside the facility. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that she died due to the lack of medical treatment necessary to aid her health conditions. Four ex-deputies have been convicted in relation to Nimali's death: Timothy Williams, Andre Dominick, Debra Becnel and and Lisa Vaccarella.²⁴ Video footage revealed that Williams and Dominick knew of her condition and failed to render her any aid.²⁵ Rather, the brought her limp body, barely able to move her feet, back to her cell to die alone and naked on the concrete floor.²⁶ They allowed her to lay there until she "passed out" and hours later, brought her to the hospital where she was declared dead.²⁷ Becnel and Vaccarella saw Nimali while she was in poor condition and unable to stand but failed to speak up

¹⁹ "St. Bernard Parish" Incarceration Transparency, 26 November 2023, <https://www.incarcerationtransparency.org/la-prison-deaths/st-bernard/>

²⁰ "Deaths in Custody- 2017 State Prison Inmate Death Record" Form NPS-41 (Addendum), 26 November 2023, <https://www.incarcerationtransparency.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Muscarello-Jamin-St.-Bernard-2017-DOC-CJ9.pdf>

²¹ "Justice for Nimali" Facebook.com, 26, November 2023, https://www.facebook.com/JusticeForNimali/about_details

²² *Id.*

²³ Sledge, Matt. "St. Bernard officers get years in prison for Nimali Henry's death: 'There are now the repercussions.'" NOLA.com, 26 November 2023, https://www.nola.com/news/courts/st-bernard-officers-get-years-in-prison-for-nimali-henrys-death-these-are-now-the/article_4fc3c0ba-82c5-11eb-bc16-3fa025b8f0ae.html

²⁴ Perlstein, Mike. She was 19 and wanted to see her baby; 10 days later she was dead on a jail room floor." WWLTV, 26 November 2023, <https://www.wwltv.com/article/news/local/deputies-who-denied-young-mother-life-saving-treatment-in-2014-sentenced/289-453c41fe-bfc8-42d2-a715-ad240225818b>

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

and tell anyone about it.²⁸ They claimed they “put their trust in their upper rank that they would take care of her.” All four were convicted in March of 2021, seven years later.²⁹

In the past four years, St. Bernard Parish has not been helpful when students at Loyola have made efforts to collect death records in their facility. Students have been thrown around to different departments just to be told we are not privy to these public documents or that the prison no longer keeps death records.

Conclusion

It is my belief that St. Bernard Parish must make the conditions and happenings of their prison more transparent in order for their facility to grow. This facility appears to “not be the worst, but not be the best” since there is very little information to find. I also think it is about time higher government actors step in and audit them or write a report on the facility so more is known. The only way to fix issues within the incarceration system is to acknowledge that there are problems and to make these problems transparent so that one day they will no longer be there. There is so much value in making prison conditions known to the public- it aids in putting pressure on the government to find solutions to the problems that are seemingly being hidden away.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*