

To: Erica Navalance and Nishi Kumar
From: Lily McLemore
Re: Better Know a Jail: Terrebonne Parish
Date: December 18, 2024

Terrebonne Parish Jail Memo

Introduction

The Terrebonne Parish Jail, officially called the Terrebonne Criminal Justice Complex, is located in the parish of Terrebonne in coastal south Louisiana. It is also sometimes referred to as the Ashland Criminal Justice Center.

The 2020 census reflected a parish population of 109,580.¹ According to the census, the population of Terrebonne is about 70% White non-Hispanic, about 18% Black non-Hispanic, about 6% Native American, and about 7% Hispanic.² The median household income in 2023 was about \$64,800, the per capita income was about \$33,000, and 16% of the population is living at or below the poverty line.³ Culturally, Terrebonne is heavily Cajun, and 75% of the population voted for Republican candidate Donald Trump in the 2024 election.⁴ The oil industry is the primary economic driver, as well as retail and the seafood and medical industries.⁵ The average height above sea level of Terrebonne Parish is about six feet, and it drops an average of nine millimeters a year, making many areas of the parish extremely vulnerable to flooding.⁶

Jail Oversight and Leadership

The Terrebonne Criminal Justice Complex falls under the Terrebonne Parish Department of Public Safety.⁷ Timothy Soignet, the Terrebonne sheriff as of this memo, took office on July 1, 2020, and oversees the Terrebonne Parish Jail for adults. Soignet is a Houma native and served in Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield with the United States Marine Corps.⁸ He retired after 20 years of service in 2006 and returned to Houma, where he began working for the sheriff's office.⁹ He is a member of the Houma-Terrebonne Marine Corps League, American Legion, Brothers in Blue, and The National Rifle Association.¹⁰

Lt. Col. Stephen Bergeron serves as Corrections Division Commander, and Major Rhonda Ledet is the warden of the jail. Ledet was appointed by Sheriff Soignet in summer 2020, and she is the first female warden of the facility. Upon appointment, she said she hopes to inspire other women to pursue career goals and is committed to ensuring that both offenders and employees are taken care of.¹¹ Ledet has been employed by the sheriff's office since 2005.¹²

¹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/terrebonneparishlouisiana/PST045219>

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ <https://voterportal.sos.la.gov/graphical>

⁵ <https://www.tpeda.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024-Evolving-Top-Employer-List-Oct-2024.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.ysi.com/ysi-blog/water-blogged-blog/2019/06/closing-the-gates-helping-communities-battle-storms>

⁷ https://www.tpcg.org/index.php?f=public_safety&p=index

⁸ <https://www.tpsnet.net/about-the-sheriff>

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ <https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/2020/08/31/meet-terrebonne-jails-new-warden/3450656001/>

¹² *Id.*

Of note: The one-season 2012 A&E reality show “Cajun Justice” followed the goings-on of the Terrebonne Parish Sheriff’s Office and then-Sheriff Vernon Bourgeois and his deputies.¹³

Facility

The Terrebonne Parish Jail is located at 3211 Grand Caillou Road, Houma, LA 70363. It is located on 30 acres in the unincorporated Terrebonne Parish community of Ashland deep in coastal south Louisiana, south of Houma, the parish seat of Terrebonne.¹⁴

The Terrebonne Parish Jail facility was originally built in 1992 and has 612 beds.¹⁵ As of December 2024, the parish jail is overpopulated and housing 702 detainees.¹⁶ The parish owns the land the jail is built on, which is located next to the parish landfill.¹⁷ It is surrounded by razor wire fencing.¹⁸ It underwent an extensive renovation in 2008-2009 after it was severely damaged by Hurricane Ike.¹⁹ The jail does not have a generator.²⁰

The jail is located in a Special Flood Hazard Area.²¹ This has long been an issue, and the jail has been plagued by flooding.²² After Hurricane Ike in 2008 caused an 18-inch storm surge to inundate the facility, the jail was closed for months, and the inmates were housed at Angola and the Annex facility while the jail underwent a \$730,000 renovation which included adding 50 beds and a new security system.²³ A 10-foot ring levee was built as well.²⁴ This renovation and construction was mostly done by incarcerated people.²⁵ The then-warden stated, “They have been in this building every day since the week after [Ike]. They impressed me. When we stayed until 8, 9, 10 o’clock at night working, they stayed. Then they get up at 2 in the morning to start cooking meals.”²⁶ After the renovation, the then-sheriff stated that “[i]t looks better now than the day it opened. It’s a whole lot neater, cleaner and better organized.”²⁷

¹³ <https://www.makpictures.com/cajun-justice>

¹⁴

<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/2010/01/26/terrebonne-jail-levee-construction-under-way/26891095007/>;
https://www.tpcg.org/files/vision2030/Draft/revised/Chapter_8_Public_Facilities.pdf.

¹⁵ https://www.tpcg.org/files/vision2030/Draft/revised/Chapter_8_Public_Facilities.pdf;

<https://houmatimes.com/news/ashland-reopens-to-tbonne-prisoners/>

¹⁶ <https://terrebonne-911-la.zuercherportal.com/#/inmates>

¹⁷ https://www.tpcg.org/files/vision2030/Draft/revised/Chapter_8_Public_Facilities.pdf

¹⁸ <https://houmatimes.com/news/ashland-reopens-to-tbonne-prisoners/>

¹⁹

<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/2010/01/26/terrebonne-jail-levee-construction-under-way/26891095007/>;

<https://houmatimes.com/news/ashland-reopens-to-tbonne-prisoners/>

²⁰

<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/local/2022/11/18/parish-president-pushes-to-build-a-new-terrebonne-jail-what-we-know/69638816007/>

²¹

<https://www.fema.gov/case-study/louisiana-terrebonne-parish-criminal-justice-center-safe-room-construction-project>

²² https://www.tpcg.org/files/vision2030/Draft/revised/Chapter_8_Public_Facilities.pdf

²³

<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/2010/01/26/terrebonne-jail-levee-construction-under-way/26891095007/>;

<https://houmatimes.com/news/ashland-reopens-to-tbonne-prisoners/>

²⁴ <https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/2010/01/26/terrebonne-jail-levee-construction-under-way/26891095007/>

²⁵ <https://houmatimes.com/news/ashland-reopens-to-tbonne-prisoners/>

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

Despite the levee construction, when a major weather event tracks toward Houma, all incarcerated individuals must be evacuated.²⁸ The evacuees are transported to other jails throughout the state.²⁹ FEMA covers this cost.³⁰ Bergeron has stated that these mass evacuations are a major security concern and involve the Terrebonne SWAT team and DOC.³¹

While there have been calls to expand the jail since at least 2013, the parish is loath to spend public funds expanding a jail that is in an area plagued by flooding.³² Despite the land being free to expand upon, as the parish owns it, the flooding risk makes any expansion construction unappealing to just about everyone.³³ Instead, there have been calls to construct a new jail on higher ground elsewhere in the parish, such as Schriever or Gray in north Terrebonne.³⁴ In 2013, constructing a new jail with 735 beds was estimated at \$48 Million.³⁵ Despite a push in 2022, these plans have not moved forward, as far as I am able to ascertain.³⁶

Services and Funding

Within the Terrebonne jail complex, there are reportedly 15-full time nurses and EMTs and one medical administrator.³⁷ Primary medical and psychiatric care is provided on site, and physicians are contracted out from Haydel Clinic.³⁸

Bergeron says there is a classroom in the jail, and the jail teaches GED programs and college courses through Ashland University out of Ohio and offers courses through LDC on anger management and drug abuse recovery.³⁹ There were three educational sessions a week provided in 2022, although it is unclear what these sessions were.⁴⁰ 17% of people incarcerated attended these sessions.⁴¹

²⁸ *Id.*;

<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/2022/03/04/terrebonne-jail-set-reopen-after-hurricane-ida-repairs-near-completion/9358065002/>

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰

<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/2022/03/04/terrebonne-jail-set-reopen-after-hurricane-ida-repairs-near-completion/9358065002/>

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<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/local/2022/11/18/parish-president-pushes-to-build-a-new-terrebonne-jail-what-we-know/69638816007/>

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶

<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/local/2022/11/18/parish-president-pushes-to-build-a-new-terrebonne-jail-what-we-know/69638816007/>

³⁷ https://www.tpcg.org/files/accounting/budget_2024.pdf

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹

<https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/local/2022/11/18/parish-president-pushes-to-build-a-new-terrebonne-jail-what-we-know/69638816007/>

⁴⁰ https://www.tpcg.org/files/accounting/budget_2024.pdf

⁴¹ *Id.*

Since 2020, the Sheriff has agreed to make a continuous effort to maintain a total DOC population of 200 inmates, and agreed to share with the Parish 50% of the DOC reimbursements.⁴² The Parish reimburses the Sheriff for feeding those incarcerated at the facility based on a flat formula of \$1.75 per day for DOC prisoners and \$12.61 per day for all others.⁴³ The projected cost of feeding inmates for 2024 was \$876,582.⁴⁴

Public Records Request

Based on my communication with Terrebonne Parish attempting to get death records, Lt. Col. Vickie Bourg via vbourg@tpso.net is the best source of contact. While Lt. Col. Vickie Bourg is not obviously connected to the Corrections department and serves as Civil Division Commander, she is the most responsive person I interacted with when requesting public records related to the jail. Although I primarily communicated with Bourg about the request, the final documents were sent to me by Deputy Stephanie Melancon at smelancon@tpso.net, who requested \$10 for the records via smelancon@tpso.net. These documents were signed in a cover letter by Lt. David Bourgeois of the Classifications Department. His contact information was not provided, nor can I find any information about him online. The records sent to me were incomplete, and he provided me with inaccurate information, as discussed below.

Inmate Mortality

In 2020 and 2021, there were zero deaths reported. In 2024 there were two deaths reported. There are no records available for 2022 and 2023, and in his letter, David Bourgeois writes that the “CJ-5 sent out by the Bureau of Justice Statistics for the years 2022 and 2023 didn't include a section to report inmate deaths.” He also writes that there was one death in 2023 and one death in 2022. Incarceration Transparency shows one death for 2023, but two deaths in 2022. Attempts to clarify this information and retrieve any information or records on the 2022 and 2023 deaths were unsuccessful. Beyond the fact that they were both men, per the CJ-3 Form, I cannot find any more information about the 2024 deaths in news articles or press releases.

Transparency

There is not much evidence of transparency at the Terrebonne Parish Jail. I was not able to find any public briefings regarding deaths in the jail or any information at all about the two 2024 deaths. There were no audits regarding jail conditions or advocacy group reports. I found most information via local news reports and budget documents. Scant information about the jail and inmate services is located on the sheriff's website at <https://www.tpsos.net/inmateservices>. It includes mailing addresses, attorney visitation info, telephone, communication, and commissary directions.

The jail roster was difficult to locate on the sheriff's website. One must scroll to the bottom on the above page, and the last “Quick Link” is “Warrants/Jail.” Clicking this takes you to a Zuercher Portal at <https://terrebonne-911-la.zuercherportal.com/#/inmates>. The design is

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ https://www.tpcg.org/files/accounting/budget_2024.pdf

⁴⁴ *Id.*

such that I initially thought this was a pirate website, but the button marked “Inmates” takes you to the Terrebonne Parish Jail roster. It is searchable by information and includes basic stats, if the person is being held for DOC, and if not, their charging information.

Recent Cases and Complaints

There are multiple civil lawsuits involving the Terrebonne Parish Criminal Justice Complex. Plaintiffs allege unsafe conditions, denial of medical care, and inadequate protection from COVID-19. Complaints raised mention overcrowding, construction, and issues surrounding evacuation. Most of these claims were dismissed. Below are some of the claims that survived dismissal.

In *Aucoin v. Larpen*, Aucoin, an inmate at the Terrebonne Parish Criminal Justice Complex filed suit against the Terrebonne sheriff when he slept on the edge of a balcony for month and fell two stories after rolling from his mattress one night, sustaining injuries for which he did not receive proper treatment.⁴⁵ The appeals court reversed the trial court’s granting of the sheriff’s motion for summary judgement.⁴⁶

There is a case against Lasalle Corrections brought by multiple plaintiffs alleging damages based on an automobile accident occurring on October 12, 2020.⁴⁷ The plaintiffs were housed at Terrebonne Jail and were being transferred to temporary housing at Catahoula Correctional Center due to a hurricane evacuation.⁴⁸ I cannot find more information about this case, however, a 23-year-old man living in Terrebonne with the same name as the lead plaintiff, Auston Lirette, died on July 21, 2021.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Aucoin v. Larpen*, 329 So.3d 363, 366, 371 (La. App. 1. Cir. 2021).

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 363.

⁴⁷ *Lirette v. Johnson*, No. 2022 CW 0682, 2022 WL 3867610 (La. App. 1. Cir. Aug. 29, 2022).

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ <https://www.samartfuneralhome.com/obituaries/Auston-Curtis-Lirette?obId=21769546>