

To: Erica Navalance, Nishi Kumar
From: Molly Payne
Date: December 29, 2024
Re: St. Charles Parish Facility Memorandum

St. Charles Parish Nelson Coleman Correctional Center

Introduction

Established in 1807,¹ St. Charles Parish is considered part of both the Greater New Orleans area and the “River Parishes.”² The parish encompasses the communities of Hahnville, Destrehan, St. Rose, Norco, New Sarpy, Des Allemands, Bayou Gauche, Boutte, Paradis, Killona, Luling, Ama, and Montz³ and has a total population of about 52,549⁴ with a median household of about \$82,172.⁵

Jail Characteristics

St. Charles Parish Nelson Colman Correctional Center (herein “Nelson Coleman” or “NCCC”) was opened on June 15, 2001, at 5061 Highway 3127, Killona, LA 70057.⁶ The Official Website of NCCC is <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/116/Corrections> and states that through its “Purpose” of “housing more inmates, [they] have seen a reduction in crime throughout the parish.”⁷ Moreover, NCCC boasts that they are “stop[ing] the cycle of crime” by “using basic techniques at a minimal cost to the Sheriff’s Office and tax payers.”⁸

Nelson Coleman “has the capacity to house 600 [incarcerated people] and averages 550 [incarcerated people].”⁹ While NCCC is considered a “parish jail” (i.e., county), the majority of the people incarcerated at the facility are being held for federal, state, and other outside parish agencies.¹⁰ Additionally, NCCC utilizes video arraignment and video visitation features to “reduce the need” for transportation and “the introduction of contraband into the facility.”¹¹ The Division of Corrections employs about “150 deputies, clerical, and medical personnel”¹² including five physicians, five licensed practical nurses, a dental assistant, two pharmacists, one registered nurse, one x-ray technician, and seven medical assistants.¹³

In terms of programs and services available to people incarcerated at NCCC, there is an on-site medical clinic, religious services provided by volunteers, Alcoholics Anonymous classes, an “Outreach Program,” and a “Worker Program.”¹⁴ Through the “Outreach Program,” NCCC

¹ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/77/History>

² <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/272/About-St-Charles-Parish>

³ *Id.*

⁴ https://data.census.gov/profile/St_Charles_Parish_Louisiana?g=050XX00US22089#populations-and-people

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/116/Corrections>

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ See <https://www.vera.org/louisiana-locked-up/parish/St.%20Charles>;
<https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/216/Jail-Roster>

¹¹ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/116/Corrections>

¹² *Id.*

¹³ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/119/Religious-Medical-Services>

¹⁴ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/119/Religious-Medical-Services>; <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/118/Programs>;
<https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/120/Outreach-Worker-Programs>

states that incarcerated “work crews . . . fill sand bags for the parish . . . and assist in storm recovery by picking up debris and trash.”¹⁵ Similarly, through the “Worker Program” incarcerated people at NCCC “assist with building maintenance . . . grounds keeping . . . prepare about 700 meals daily” and other tasks “for the entire facility.”¹⁶

In November 2021, the Vera Institute found that out of the 333 people incarcerated at NCCC, 171 (~51%) were being held on behalf of the Louisiana Department of Corrections and 77 people (~23%) were being held on behalf of federal entities.¹⁷ As of November 18, 2024, NCCC was incarcerating a total of 198 people: 188 men (~95%) and 10 women (~5%).¹⁸ The age range of those incarcerated ranged from 17 to 77 years old.¹⁹ Moreover, the majority of those incarcerated were being held on behalf of other agencies such as the US Marshal 62 (~31%), the Louisiana Department of Corrections 28 (~14%), and other agencies 45 (~22%).²⁰ Finally, the racial makeup of those incarcerated was as follows: 79 “White” (~40%), 113 “Black” (~57%), 2 (~1%) “Asian”, and 4 “Not Specified” (~2%).²¹

Since July 1, 1996,²² Greg Champagne has been the Sheriff of St. Charles Parish. Champagne is a graduate Louisiana State University Law Center and was an assistant district attorney for 14 years with a 94% conviction rate.²³ Recently elected to his eighth term, he is “the second longest-tenured sheriff in Louisiana,”²⁴ and was president of the National Sheriffs’ Association from 2016-2017 and 2023-2024.²⁵ Additionally, his daughter is Judge Rochelle Champagne Fahrig of the 29th Judicial District of St. Charles Parish.²⁶ Since 2014, Major Alvin Robinson has been the warden of NCCC.²⁷ Robinson graduated from Mississippi State University with a degree in physical education, was hired by Champagne in 1997.²⁸

For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2023, Champagne’s salary was \$189,573 with a total compensation of \$277,112 including benefits.²⁹ Per the St. Charles Parish Sheriff’s Office’s website, their annual budget is about 39 million.³⁰ However, the “Schedule of Revenues, Expenditures, and Changes in Fund Balance” from the 2023 St. Charles Parish Sheriff Financial Report indicated that the actual total expenditures were \$47,615,477. Further, the total revenue was \$54,109,188, with the majority of said revenue (\$39,486,310) coming from ad valorem property taxes and with \$3,036,545 of the revenue coming from “Feeding and keeping

¹⁵ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/120/Outreach-Worker-Programs>

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ <https://www.vera.org/louisiana-locked-up/parish/St.%20Charles;>

¹⁸ <https://stcharles-so-la.zuercherportal.com/#/inmates>

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/77/History>

²³ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/258/Sheriff-Greg-Champagne>

²⁴ <https://www.heraldguide.com/news/sheriff-reflects-on-time-in-office-after-8th-inauguration/>

²⁵ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/258/Sheriff-Greg-Champagne>

²⁶ <https://www.heraldguide.com/news/sheriff-reflects-on-time-in-office-after-8th-inauguration/>;
<https://www.29jdc.org/judgefahrig-1>

²⁷ [https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/directory.aspx?EID=41](https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/directory.aspx?EID=41;);

<https://www.lobservateur.com/2014/11/25/major-alvin-robinson-warden/>

²⁸ [https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/directory.aspx?EID=41](https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/directory.aspx?EID=41;);

<https://www.lobservateur.com/2014/11/25/major-alvin-robinson-warden/>

²⁹ [https://app2.lla.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/1b5f165dec9cc53486258aa8006dbde2/\\$file/000039f8.pdf?open=&ent&.7773098](https://app2.lla.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/1b5f165dec9cc53486258aa8006dbde2/$file/000039f8.pdf?open=&ent&.7773098)

³⁰ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/111/Finance#:~:text=Function,39%20million%20dollar%20annual%20budget.>

prisoners.”³¹ Interestingly, while the Sheriff’s Office receives over \$3 million dollars for “Feeding and keeping prisoners,” a breakdown of expenditures reveals that St. Charles Parish Sheriff’s Office only actually spends \$951,995 on “Prisoner feeding and maintenance.”³² Finally, while \$50,000 was budgeted for attorney fees, \$91,298 was the actual cost.³³

Deaths in Custody

Since January 1, 2020, there have been three deaths in custody at NCCC. All three deaths occurred in different locations: an isolation cell, in general housing, and a booking cell. Two of the deaths were classified as “natural” and one death was classified as “accidental.”

On February 06, 2023, a 71 year old man, Jay Foster, “was found unresponsive in his cell.”³⁴ At the time of his death, he was being “house in an isolation dorm due to the seriousness of his offenses and medical conditions.”³⁵ The Sheriff’s Office press release states that he was found unresponsive “just before 1:30 PM” for a “scheduled medical visit.”³⁶ Ultimately, the coroner listed the causes of death as “Hypertensive Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease; Cardiomegaly; Remote Cardiac Infarction; Obesity.”

On April 04, 2024, a 37 year old woman, Brandy Harris was “found unresponsive” during early morning “routine security checks.”³⁷ Documents obtained via my Public Records Request indicate that Ms. Harris was booked into NCCC around 8:16 p.m. on April 3, 2024. Around 12:15 a.m. Ms. Harris reported having chest pains and told medical staff, “I think my blood pressure is up.” The medical staff reported that her vitals were “in normal range” but that “her pulse was slightly elevated.” After being placed back in the booking cell, at 12:50 a.m. Ms. Harris again reported having chest pains and the medical staff noted that she was “constantly moving and requesting to talk on the phone.” Jail staff observed Ms. Harris “pac[ing] the cell floors, and finally, at approximately 4:37a.m., she laid down and appeared to have fallen asleep.” However, during shift change at about 5:38 a.m., she was found unresponsive. A report from a crime scene technician stated that Ms. Harris was “observed on the floor lying on two mattress pads . . . froth is observed around her mouth and nose.” And upon an April 05, 2024, post mortem examination, “clear/white froth was observed in the bronchioles and esophagus. A clear double wrapped baggie of unknown substance was recovered in the stomach lining.” Ultimately, the pathologist performing the examination classified her death as “an accident due to Acute Methamphetamine toxicity and multiple drug toxicity.”

On August 11, 2024, at about 2:26 a.m. other incarcerated individuals “alerted correctional officers via intercom” that a 37 year old man, Khrist Pfister, was in “medical distress in the bathroom of the dorm.”³⁸ Mr. Pfister was found “seated on the commode, appearing to be in a medically distressed state and unresponsive.”³⁹ Per the Coroner’s Report, the cause of death was determined to be “Exsanguination due to actively bleeding duodenal ulcer; Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; Coronary artery disease.”

³¹[https://app2.lla.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/1b5f165dec9cc53486258aa8006dbde2/\\$file/000039f8.pdf?open&ent=7773098](https://app2.lla.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/1b5f165dec9cc53486258aa8006dbde2/$file/000039f8.pdf?open&ent=7773098)

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/7922>

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/8571>

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/8799>

In conclusion, all three deaths occurred at different locations within NCCC, at different times of day, and were reportedly from different causes. However, after reviewing the documents obtained via my public records request, one common trend emerged: the deceased were all found “unresponsive.” While this could simply be an unfortunate coincidence, it may also indicate that there is not sufficient medical attention/supervision.

Evidence of Oversight and Transparency

Nelson Coleman Correctional Center does not appear to be ACA accredited,⁴⁰ nor was I able to identify any hearings on operations, judicial orders, or consent decrees. However, there is evidence of oversight in the form of a Prison Rape Elimination Act audit that was conducted in August of 2022.⁴¹ A summary of the audit concluded that all standards were “met.”⁴²

In terms of transparency, St. Charles Parish does publish press releases which cover topics including deaths in custody and incident briefs.⁴³ Additionally, there is an online roster of all the people currently incarcerated at NCCC.⁴⁴ However, my experience submitting a public records was incredibly frustrating and anything but transparent.

I sent my initial request by mail (as required by their policy) on August 28, 2024, and ultimately did not receive the requested records until November 18, 2024. After submitting my request in August, I received my first response via email on September 25, 2024 stating that my request “revealed that a wide-ranging analysis must be conducted to determine the availability of the records/ documents you seek; whether the records requested constitute public records; and, whether any exceptions to the Public Records Act apply to the records.” After multiple follow-ups, I received a letter on October 1, 2024 stating that “. . . we do not submit forms regarding deaths in custody to any of the entities on your request.” After clarifying that “my request was not limited to ‘completed forms,’ but rather requested “[i]ndividual and summary data and/or completed forms’ (emphasis added),” the Sheriff’s Office responded saying that they had “no documents responsive to [my] request.” On October 8, 2024, after asking them to please confirm whether that meant there had not been any deaths in custody, I was contacted by St. Charles Sheriff Parish Office’s outside counsel, Steven Mauterer at Blue Williams alleging that the language of my request was unclear.

After multiple rounds of emails, Mr. Mauterer informed me that he could provide me with 6 pages of records that were responsive to my request, but that if I wanted any and all records relating to deaths in custody, that I would need to submit an additional request. Consequently, on October 28, 2024, I sent a second public records request via certified mail. While I was not successful in obtaining video records, on November 18, 2024, I received 78 public records relating to deaths in custody.

Notable Cases on Conditions in the Last 5 Years

While there were a few civil suits naming NCCC, Sheriff Champagne, or Alvin Robinson as defendants, most have been dismissed. However, after searching for cases where the defense counsel was Mr. Mauterer (from my public records request), I was able to identify one suit

⁴⁰https://www.aca.org/ACA/ACA_Member/Standards_and_Accreditation/SAC_AccFacHome.aspx?WebsiteKey=139f6b09-e150-4c56-9c66-284b92f21e51&hkey=f53cf206-2285-490e-98b7-66b5ecf4927a&5940f470ebf4=2#5940f470ebf4

⁴¹<https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/DocumentCenter/View/1429/Nelson-Coleman-Final-PREA--FEB-12-2023?bidId=>

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ <https://www.stcharlessheriff.org/Archive.aspx?AMID=36>

⁴⁴ <https://stcharles-so-la.zuercherportal.com/#/inmates>

alleging the use of excessive force against an incarcerated individual at NCCC.⁴⁵ It is scheduled for pretrial conference on January 15, 2025.⁴⁶ Finally, while not a notable case, many advocacy groups have called attention to the fact that incarcerated people at NCCC were not evacuated during Hurricane Ida.⁴⁷ While there were no reports of injuries, many family members experienced distress because they were not able to communicate with their loved ones.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Moses v. Mahmoud*, 2024 WL 4289572:

<https://l.next.westlaw.com/Document/I60100fc07be411efadcd9fbe4084ce4a/View/FullText.html?listSource=RelatedInfo&list=CitingReferences&rank=1&docFamilyGuid=I60b2b8607be411efb86be7d2737cd9b6&overruleRisk=true&ppcid=c570a419cbe2442bb119eda46530e10c&originationContext=citingreferences&transitionType=CitingReferencesItem&contextData=%28sc.RelatedInfo%29>

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷

[https://theintercept.com/2021/09/22/hurricane-ida-louisiana-evacuation-prison/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20facility%20was%20never%20at,my%20way%20of%20being%20calm.%E2%80%9D](https://theintercept.com/2021/09/22/hurricane-ida-louisiana-evacuation-prison/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20facility%20was%20never%20at,my%20way%20of%20being%20calm.%E2%80%9D;) ;

<https://grist.org/equity/hurricane-ida-jails-prisons-emergency-response/>

<https://www.motherjones.com/criminal-justice/2021/09/detainees-ida-lafourche-sandbags-evacuation-louisiana/>

⁴⁸ *Id.*