

Inmate's slaying caused outcry



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Joel Seidel and Marvin Lister were two men whose paths should never have crossed.

Frail and mentally ill, Seidel was a 65-year-old inmate at Camden County Jail. On Jan. 27, the former stockbroker wound up in the same cell as Lister, a muscular 35-year-old with a history of severe mental illness and brutal violence.

Minutes after the two were placed in the cell, Lister beat Seidel to death, kicking and punching him more than 100 times, prosecutors said. Seidel was found lifeless in a pool of blood, naked from the waist down.

Lister is charged with murder. At a Jan. 5 status hearing, the court will likely discuss whether he is mentally competent to stand trial, Bill Shralow, a spokesman for the Camden County Prosecutor's Office, said.

Lister has been in various state psychiatric facilities since 1995 but was moved to the Camden jail after being charged with raping a fellow patient at a mental hospital.

Seidel was in prison for allegedly violating a court order that barred him from contacting his ex-wife and daughter. He could have been released on \$150 bail.

Seidel's death has highlighted the systemic problems in the jail and the state's mental health system. In the weeks and months after Seidel's death, various problems came to light, including the court system and overcrowding in the jail.

A paperwork glitch barred Seidel from being sent to a psychiatric facility in Gloucester Township. The Courier-Post also reported Seidel had been beaten two weeks before his murder and at least two phone calls were made to the jail by the Camden County Prosecutor's Office, warning them Seidel was in danger.

"There was a lot of public outcry when everything came to light," said Mary Lynne Reynolds, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Southwestern New Jersey.

The jail maintains records showing how many times corrections officers have patrolled past cells. The prosecutor's office announced a criminal probe into whether those records were falsified.

Two corrections officers on duty the night Seidel was murdered were suspended without pay a few days later, but the prosecutor's office later announced it would file no criminal charges against any jail employees.

County committees were formed and reports commissioned to study the jail's problems and come up with a list of recommendations. Federal officials also conducted a three-day probe.

In September, the county's Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee made some suggestions to ease overcrowding: Using electronic monitoring for some low-level offenders and not incarcerating certain traffic offenders. The committee also recommended expanding a program that allows low-level offenders to do community service in lieu of jail time.

A report prepared by former Human Services Commissioner William Waldman concluded the county should invest in more training for staff at the jail and create an ombudsman for mentally ill inmates.

Waldman's report also said the county should look at the process for competency evaluations and involuntary commitments for mentally ill inmates to reduce delays that lengthen their stay at the jail.

Tom Kline, who represents the Seidel family in a federal civil rights lawsuit, said Waldman's report clearly points out the numerous system failures that led to Seidel's death.

"The report clearly shows that Joel Seidel's death was preventable and caused by the deliberate indifference of jail officials, guards and the mental health workers charged with Joel's care and protection," said Kline of Kline & Specter in Philadelphia.

In a statement to the Courier-Post, county officials said they are making strides toward improving the jail, judicial process and their mental health system.

They have hired 23 new corrections officers, whose cost is expected to be offset by a projected savings in overtime. Officials have also instituted a new color-coded classification system for inmates.

The freeholder board, in cooperation with the courts, has created the home electronic detention program for nonviolent offenders. "This alternative to incarceration reduces taxpayers' burden of housing and feeding inmates, while allowing those placed in the program to continue to be contributing members of society," the statement said.

As of Jan. 3, the courts will begin considering plea agreements containing electronic monitoring, where appropriate. The county will also expand a program allowing nonviolent offenders to report for community labor detail as an alternative to incarceration.

The courts will also continue to seek detention alternatives for low-level traffic offenses and nonviolent offenders.

The county department of corrections has changed medical care providers and expanded its mental health program, helping to rehabilitate inmates.