



BARBALUNGA FOR SHERIFF

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“Justice That Works”

Contact: Katherine Yon, Communications Director: klyon1105@aol.com

Why the Public Should Ask Questions About Every Inmate Death

Berkshire County—Alf Barbalunga released today the following statement in response to the unreported death of an inmate from Berkshire County:

It is disappointing that Sheriff Bowler would focus on me and question my concern or compassion regarding the death of an inmate, rather than focus on what actually happened to the female inmate in question. Sheriffs are required to report all deaths to the state police detective unit assigned to the District Attorney’s office, as well as make notifications to the medical examiner’s office. As Sheriff, I will also release a statement to the public posted on the Sheriff’s website, protecting all personal-identifying information.

I am running against Sheriff Bowler because I feel his lack of oversight at his facility has already resulted in too many preventable deaths, such as the 2021 suicide which should have been caught by better information sharing with the Court, or those who overdosed following release from his “abstinence” program.

I am motivated by empathy, compassion, and concern, and a love for my community, and a strong desire to protect them and offer them better care and support.

I learned a week ago from a person in law enforcement that an inmate in her mid-40s had died at the Chicopee jail due to undetermined causes. I waited a week to see if any report would be filed—but no one reported this woman’s death or the particular circumstances.

Given what Sheriff Bowler had previously referred to as a “little glitch” in information sharing that had resulted in the suicide of an individual in his custody last year, when I am told of a death of a young woman in custody, I am naturally concerned.

When that information isn’t shared publicly—with the name redacted--I wonder why. Multiple attempts to contact the Western Mass Regional Woman’s Correctional Facility to inquire about this tragedy were met with evasiveness and non-responsiveness. Calls went unreturned.

As a member of the public safety community, and as a father and husband, I was saddened by this woman's tragic death, and as someone who wants prisoners to receive better care, I sought answers to determine what happened, as I felt the public should have been notified, even if this 46-year-old woman died due to "natural causes", "medical issues", or something else. All deaths of incarcerated individuals in a publicly-funded facility should be reported, without personal-identifying information. Specific cause of death should be independently verified, with a review of what attempts were made to save the life of the inmate. Furthermore, any procedural shortcomings should be identified in such a review.

It is common for correctional facilities to issue a press release or otherwise let the public know that someone has died of "natural causes" in their facility. I naturally wondered why that did not happen in this case. Deaths of inmates should be a part of a facility's annual reporting.

A public statement was not issued by the jail authorities until after my press release asking those questions prompted the media to contact the jails.

I withheld the name of the deceased from my press release to protect the family, and I never accused anyone of mistreatment. Moreover, regarding my concern for women being in Chicopee, this issue is about having female inmates close to their family where they can visit, communicate, and, if there are health issues, the family can stay on top of them, something I feel strongly about, and of course, there's more accountability and transparency by an administration to Berkshire County residents when their family is incarcerated in this County. We deserve an award-winning facility right here at home.

When something tragic happens to someone from the Berkshires after they are sent to Chicopee or Boston, it's still a tragedy, whether preventable or not, but there's less accountability to the community, and we need to know our elected sheriff and other authorities are doing everything in their power to maintain the health and well-being of all of our prisoners and that necessary information, medical, psychological, is being shared between authorities.

The way to maintain trust is to maintain an open line of communication with the public, and to show the public that the authorities trusted with our lives are doing everything they can in a professional manner.

I believe in transparency and accountability, and if something like this happened on my watch, I would let the public know someone had passed of natural causes, that we expressed our condolences, that our medical team had done their best, and I would withhold their name and personal details to protect the family.

As Sheriff Bowler has acknowledged, a young man did commit suicide in his custody last year, because information wasn't shared by the Court or requested by the Sheriff's office, as a rule, and an at-risk inmate was not watched to prevent his suicide. Obviously, that is a tragedy as well, and in the future, the sheriff pledged to see if he could resolve what he referred to as a "little glitch" in information sharing. But that was more than a "little glitch," and I believe we need to be more proactive in preventing tragedies.

I feel a great deal of responsibility for the people my office supervises, while always being transparent to the public, and I expect the same of the Sheriff's Office at all times.

In summary, Sheriff Bowler sought to divert attention away from the unfortunate death of an inmate that I felt should be made public. Any prisoner in the sheriff's care who loses their life—regardless of cause—should not be used to launch a political attack. The Sheriff should simply be explaining what happened to this inmate, what were the suspected underlying causes of death, and whether his staff were aware of her medical conditions prior to her death. An independent medical review of all such deaths should be included, with personal identifying information redacted.

It's my job as a compassionate candidate and member of the public to ensure that the public is always treated with care and protection, especially when in custody, and we can't know if that's happening without transparency and accountability from public officials. Secrecy serves no one.

It was entirely reasonable to inquire why a young woman incarcerated in Chicopee passed away suddenly on July 11th in light of the suicide death in 2021. The public needs to know the sheriff has resolved all the "little glitches", and that if any of their friends or family members are in our custody, they will receive the best medical treatment and medical care we can provide.

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