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'I don't want this to happen to somebody else'



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By ANITA BURKE, Mail Tribune

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Pete Wirts quotes a few passages from the Bible during an Aug. 14 memorial service at New Song Church for Roger Price, who died in Jackson County's sobering center July 30. (Mail Tribune / Jim Craven)

After three deaths at Jackson County's sobering center over three years, those left behind are calling for changes

Larry Price spent most of July calling Southern Oregon homeless shelters looking for his brother Roger &

8212; an alcoholic who hadn't seen his family in four years. Larry wanted to tell Roger that their father had died July 9.

Larry was driving home from work in Longview, Wash., on Aug. 4 when a mission in Coos Bay called his cell phone with the news that Roger, 50, had died in the sobering center in Medford.

"It was almost like I was expecting it because of his lifestyle, but it still came as a surprise," Larry

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In mid-August, Larry came to Medford to pick up his brother's cremated remains and try sense of his death in a center designed to provide people with a safe place to sober up.

"It's a matter of finding the truth so maybe this doesn't happen again," Larry said. Roger the early morning of July 30 was the second at the Jackson County sobering center this s Jack Paul Hinchberger, 50, died of an overdose of alcohol and painkillers June 15.

The only other known death in the center's roughly 30-year history was in March 2003, v Raye Brand, 48, died of an overdose of alcohol and opiates.

Friends and family of all three men question whether more could have been done to prev deaths. They call for a higher level of medical supervision and better staffing so that peo are suffering from alcohol and drug addiction get the care they need.

"People shouldn't be neglected because they are drunk," said Hinchberger's girlfriend, Ka Zamani.

"If (officials) can't adequately staff the center and safely care for people, they have to do something," said Caroline Morgan, Brand's brother's partner. "They should be accountable for a level of care."

Police investigations into the deaths of Price and Hinchberger show workers at the center followed guidelines approved by county health officials in September 2003 for admitting and checking on intoxicated people.

"Having anyone pass is a difficult emotional situation, but I'm proud of how they (center workers) responded professionally," said Christine Mason, Addictions Recovery Center executive director.

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ARC has operated the center under a contract with Jackson County since November 2004.

An internal examination of the guidelines, done in addition to routine reviews, found nothing amiss, Mason said.

"At this point, nothing has changed," she said.

Under the current guidelines, people are steered to a hospital rather than the sobering center if a blood-alcohol level can't be obtained or is higher than .4, or if pulse and blood-pressure readings can't be obtained.

Drivers are considered drunk at a blood-alcohol level of .08. Most charts showing the effects of alcohol note the onset of coma and risk of respiratory arrest and death at levels of .4 or higher.

Insulin-dependent diabetics and people who report chest pain, bleeding or recent seizures or trauma also are turned away.

From mid-May to mid-August, the center turned away 54 people, Mason said. Four people couldn't get in because the center was full. Thirty-four were sent to area hospitals for medical clearance and 11 of those returned to the center after being checked. The other 16 were turned away for not meeting admission criteria or refusing required tests.

But none of those exemptions applied when Medford police brought Roger Price to the center. Officer Jason Antley had found him passed out in some bushes along the Bear Creek Greenway near Railroad Park shortly after 2 p.m. July 29.

Price's friends on the street, who gathered to remember him Aug. 14 with a memorial service at a free lunch served by New Song Church in Medford, said he had been drinking around the clock for weeks before his final trip to the sobering center.

Price had spent decades on the streets, battling alcoholism, his brother said.

One of eight children who moved around the country following their father's Army and Federal Aviation Administration career, Roger started drinking, stealing cars and running away from home at 16 when the family lived in Eugene, Larry said.

Roger kept in intermittent contact with his dad, Larry said. He would send home letters and pictures of his life in shelters across Southern Oregon when he was sober, then disappear for months until a concerned family member could track him down. He spent years drifting in and out of the South Coast Gospel Mission in Coos Bay, where he forged close ties to employees and helped minister to other homeless people when he could. Occasionally he would return home.

"We would always take him in, clean him up and get him in a program," Larry said. "When he was sober, he was a blessing to be around."

At the sobering center, a breath test found Roger Price had a blood-alcohol content of .352. Numerous Web sites designed to educate people about alcohol say that at .35, the body responds as if under surgical anesthesia and coma is possible. But technicians at the center report that people with blood-alcohol content of .3 or higher walk in with police almost every night.

Price was lodged in a large room at the sobering center that can house up to five people and was full that Saturday night. A log provided to police showed that a center employee checked Price at least every half-hour as called for in the center's policy. The employee noted on the log that Price had some juice at midnight, was talking with other men in the room at 12:30 a.m., slept on his left side from — to 2:30 a.m. and was sleeping at the — a.m. check.

One of the four other men in the room, Troy Anderson, awoke to a gurgling sound in the early morning hours and saw Price convulsing.

"I thought he might have epilepsy or something, so I pounded on the door," he said at Price's memorial service. He showed a knuckle he said was still swollen two weeks later from his attempt to attract attention.

Anderson said the technician came in and nudged Price with his foot, then left and returned with a police officer to check and see if Price was breathing. Then he returned with a phone to call 9-1-1. Anderson said he could hear sirens approaching in the distance and paramedics arrived in moments to start resuscitation attempts.

Police reports bear out that sobering technician Rick Johnson was summoned to a reported seizure, checked on Price with a Phoenix police officer who was at the center and called for help at 3:26 a.m. Mercy Flights emergency medical workers tried to get Price breathing again, but pronounced him dead at 3:50 a.m., a police report said.



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Investigators questioned the four men in the room at the time of Price's death about any fights or problems in the unit, but all said everyone was sleeping.

An autopsy revealed obstructed arteries and Price's death certificate lists heart disease as the cause of death.

"They have got to have medical supervision of some sort," said Scott Rogers, who described Price as his best friend while they both lived homeless on the streets of Medford.

The homeless people who gathered at the church where Price worshipped and helped serve meals for the hungry discussed their concerns about the care offered at the sobering center and worried that the community might not care about the death of one of them.

Rogers said Price hadn't showed up at the bench where the two often met to talk, but he didn't start to worry until he heard a talk radio announcer reporting on a death at the sobering center over the weekend.

"Her voice was just like, 'Oh well, some homeless guy died in detox,'" he said.

Concern that no one would speak out and demand accountability prompted Kathy Zamani, Hinchberger's girlfriend, to call the in mid-August.

"There's nothing I can do for Jack now," she said. "But I don't want this to happen to somebody else."

Hinchberger lived in Bullhead City, Ariz., with his mother, Cecil Hinchberger, 80. He had driven with her to Philomath so she could have her car there while she spent six weeks planning and attending three weddings and a graduation for her various grandchildren, Zamani said. Then he got on a Greyhound bus back to Arizona.

He called Zamani, who lives in Charlotte, N.C., from Oregon at about 6 p.m. June 14 and sounded intoxicated, she said.

Hinchberger had battled alcoholism along with numerous other health problems, including collapsed lungs, chest infections, esophageal problems and a stroke in 2005. However, he had been sober for about a year, she said.

"I told him he couldn't be drinking on that bus," she said.

Greyhound officials repeated that message, and, at the station at 212 N. Bartlett St., called Medford police at about 7:20 p.m. June 14 to remove Hinchberger, who had passed out on the bus and been difficult to rouse, police reports said.

Hinchberger told Medford police officer Bernabe Maya that he had consumed three 40-ounce beers. At first he resisted going to the sobering center, but finally agreed, got into the police car and dozed off on the short trip to the center, Maya's report said.

At the center, Hinchberger reported that he had been drinking whiskey and told the assistant manager, Allan Wattenberg, about his stroke. At first, Hinchberger resisted giving a breath test, but when he complied, the test showed he had a blood-alcohol level of .171, police reports said. Wattenberg noted that he appeared more intoxicated and perhaps he hadn't provided an adequate sample.

Maya's report tells that Hinchberger fell into a sitting position on the floor during the intake process. Maya and Wattenberg helped Hinchberger, who walked with a cane, to one of the sobering center's three isolation rooms shortly before 8 p.m.

Hinchberger settled onto a floor mat on his hands and knees, resting his head on the ground, and could be heard snoring loudly, Wattenberg told investigators.

Technician Johnson came on duty and took over the half-hourly checks at 9:30 p.m. His reports noted nothing unusual. At — a.m. he nudged Hinchberger with his foot and the man rolled onto his stomach with a sigh. Johnson noted a slight position change around — a.m., then a problem at 3:45 a.m. Hinchberger was not breathing, nonresponsive and cold to the touch. Johnson called 9-1-1, reports said.

Medford Fire Department responded and declared Hinchberger dead.

An autopsy June 15 found no evidence of trauma or a criminal act, but toxicology tests returned later pegged the cause of death as an overdose of alcohol and painkillers including codeine and propoxyphene (Darvon), said Tim Pike, deputy medical examiner for Jackson County.

Investigators found a water bottle filled with what appeared to be whiskey and numerous

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Senior Stretch & Flexibility Class	9:30 am
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Jacksonville Museum Quilters	9:30 am
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prescription medication bottles in Hinchberger's possessions, reports said.

Those possessions weren't searched when Hinchberger was brought to the sobering center. Mason said the center's policy is to respect people's privacy and not search their packs.

"We have them empty their pockets and we check them with a metal detector to make sure they don't take anything in with them," she said.

"There was nothing to alert (technicians) that anything else was going on," Pike said, after reviewing both Hinchberger's and Price's deaths. "I think they did everything they could.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword, because otherwise these guys would have died on the streets."

Jay Brand, whose brother died in the sobering center in 2003, has his doubts.

He was with his brother, a binge drinker who was going through a difficult divorce, when Medford police responded to a complaint about Jody Brand stumbling drunkenly down Riverside Avenue on March 13, 2003.

Driving by, Jay had spotted his brother and had just stopped to try to persuade Jody, who had faced heroin charges, to come home with him.

Jay said his brother had seizures related to head injuries sustained in a car accident and needed to be monitored closely when intoxicated. He asked police to take Jody to the hospital, but they took him to the sobering center, then operated by Jackson County. He was found dead by a center employee the next morning.

The two deaths this summer brought the Brand family's pain back to the surface, prompting Jay Brand to call the .

"Mom would really like to see something done," he said. "It hurts her that he was left like that. And now to see it happening again."

"With three deaths you have to take a look," said Morgan, Jay Brand's longtime girlfriend. "They might have a problem."

Reach reporter Anita Burke at 776-4485, or e-mail .

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