



Report: Majority Of Oregon's Jail Deaths Last Year Were People With Disabilities

Jefferson Public Radio | By [Erik Neumann](#)

Published February 8, 2021 at 9:51 PM PST



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Erik Neumann / JPR

A holding cell inside the Jackson County jail.

A new report into deaths in Oregon jails shows most people who died in 2020 had a disability, such as a mental health need. Two of the ten deaths last year took place in Jackson and Klamath Counties.

The report from [Disability Rights Oregon](#) (DRO) was an investigation into the ten identified jail deaths that occurred in the state in 2020. As Oregon's disability watchdog,

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The biggest finding in the report, according to author Liz Reetz, is that nine of the ten people they identified who died last year in Oregon jails had a disability. And while the overall jail population decreased significantly because of custody reductions during the COVID-19 pandemic, she says, the number of jail deaths was higher than in recent years.

"This is really about thinking through systemic problems and systemic failures that's causing this really high rate of death in Oregon," Reetz says.

DRO works with the Oregon State Sheriff's Association on policy recommendations, including issues like improved suicide protocols. Reetz says there are three main policy areas they plan to focus on during Oregon's legislative session in hopes of reducing future deaths.

Those priorities include: producing adequate health care standards and effective suicide protocols for jails; strengthening jail oversight; and preventing improper incarceration of people with disabilities by investing in community-based physical and mental health services.

Jackson County Jail Commander Josh Aldrich acknowledges that jail populations have decreased without a similar drop in deaths, but he says their jail undergoes annual oversight from citizen evaluators, the Oregon State Sheriff's Association, U.S. Marshals and the federal Bureau of Prisons.

"There's a lot of oversight and I feel like the report doesn't give that credit, but again, I know it's talking about all the jails," Aldrich says.

He says their ability to address people with mental illness in Jackson County would be improved with continued crisis intervention training of staff and a more modern facility, like the jail expansion the sheriff's office lobbied for in 2020.

Klamath County Sheriff Chris Kaber declined an interview about the report, citing the potential for future litigation surrounding the in-custody death at the Klamath County jail last year.

The DRO report was inspired by [Booked and Buried](#), a 2019 investigative series into jail deaths in Washington and Oregon from IPR partners Oregon Public Broadcasting and

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"We need to be keeping these people safe," says Reetz with Disability Rights Oregon. "They don't give up their right to adequate health care just because they ended up in the jail."

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Erik Neumann is JPR's news director. He earned a master's degree from the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism and joined JPR as a reporter in 2019 after working at NPR member station KUER in Salt Lake City.

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