

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1802

May 19, 2015

The Honorable Loretta Lynch
The Attorney General of the United States
Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

Dear Attorney General Lynch,

It is with great concern that I write to request an investigation into alleged civil rights violations of members of the Iberia Parish Sheriff's Office (IPSO). Since 2005, at least eight people have died in the custody of the IPSO - in its jail or after an arrest - according to records compiled by The Baton Rouge Advocate. Seven of those who died were inmates. At least two of those seven suffered from mental illness. These figures are troubling, but it is unclear whether they actually paint a complete picture of what has gone on at IPSO. According to Iberia Parish Sheriff Louis Ackal, the IPSO does not keep records of how many inmates or arrestees have died in its custody. This makes it difficult to know with any certainty how many people have actually died in IPSO custody.

In addition to the numerous incidents that have ended tragically, there are several indications that IPSO has committed many more violations in recent years. According to records provided by the IPSO and the Louisiana Sheriffs' Association, which insures the Sheriff's Office, the office has settled civil suits with at least 10 plaintiffs since 2008 paying out roughly \$1.1 million in damages. By comparison, the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office's lawsuit settlement costs since 2008 are about half those for Iberia Parish despite having a population about three times its size and a Sheriff's Office that employs almost three times as many officers. The suits include complaints of excessive force, improper medical care of inmates and inmate deaths, sexual assault and harassment, and wrongful termination.

The following list highlights some of the incidents alleged to have occurred at IPSO over the past 10 years:

- In 2005, a former inmate alleged that deputies beat him so badly when he was booked into jail that he had to spend two weeks in a hospital.

- In 2008, a man alleged that a deputy beat him so badly during an arrest that he coughed up blood and then a muzzle was put over his mouth. The man later settled a suit with the Sheriff's Office for \$50,000.
- In 2009, Michael Jones, a 43-year-old man who suffered from bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, died in the jail after an altercation with then-Warden Frank Ellis and then a-lieutenant Wesley Hayes. This year, a judge ruled that two Sheriff's Office employees were responsible for Jones' death. The judgment in the case totaled \$61,000.
- In 2009, former inmate Curtis Ozenne alleged that officers began a contraband sweep by forcing him to remain in the "Muslim praying position" for nearly three hours. Mr. Ozenne alleged he was kicked in the mouth multiple times, threatened with police dogs and then his head was shaved. In his complaint, Mr. Ozenne also alleged that Sherriff Ackal threatened him with a dog and watched as an officer struck him with a baton for smiling. Mr. Ozenne's suit against the Sheriff's Office was later settled for \$15,000.
- In 2009, Robert Sonnier, a 62-year-old mentally ill man, died as the result of a fatal blow delivered by an IPSO Deputy in the course of a physical altercation. After Mr. Sonnier was unable to receive a psychological evaluation authorized by his wife, he was left in a wheelchair to stew in his own waste for several hours. He eventually became agitated which led to altercations with Deputies that resulted in Sonnier being pepper sprayed twice and eventually leading to the fatal blow.
- In 2012, Marcus Robicheaux, an inmate at Iberia Parish Jail, was pulled from a wall and thrown to the ground as IPSO correctional officers ran a contraband sweep. A deputy's dog then attacked Mr. Robicheaux, biting his legs, arms and torso, as the deputy stomped and kicked the prone inmate. The whole three-minute incident was captured on video from the jail's surveillance cameras.
- In 2014, Victor White III died as the result of a fatal gunshot wound while handcuffed in the backseat of an IPSO squad car. The sheriff's deputies who arrested Mr. Victor alleged that he wouldn't leave the car and became "uncooperative." They say he pulled out a handgun, while his hands were cuffed behind his back, and shot himself in the back. However, the full coroner's report indicated that Mr. White had died from a single shot to his right chest, contradicting the initial police statement that he had shot himself in the back.

Recent unrest in communities across the country have shed light on the fact that many people feel they have been unfairly targeted by police and forced to live their lives under the threat of an oppressive regime. The role our law enforcement officers fill is too important to the function of our society to allow this dynamic to go unchecked. It is incumbent upon us all to step in and intervene for the people we serve whenever it appears that their rights have been abridged in any way. There is perhaps no institution better suited to serve as that intervening force than the U.S. Department of Justice. For that reason, I am asking you to launch a full investigation into the IPSO to uncover what, if any, civil rights violations the citizens of Iberia Parish and the inmates at Iberia Parish Jail have been subject to over the course of the last decade.

I ask that you respond to this inquiry no later than **June 5, 2015**. You may contact Reginald Babin in my office by email at reginald.babin@mail.house.gov or by phone at (202) 225-6636 to facilitate this request. I look forward to your prompt reply. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'C. Richmond', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Cedric L. Richmond
Member of Congress