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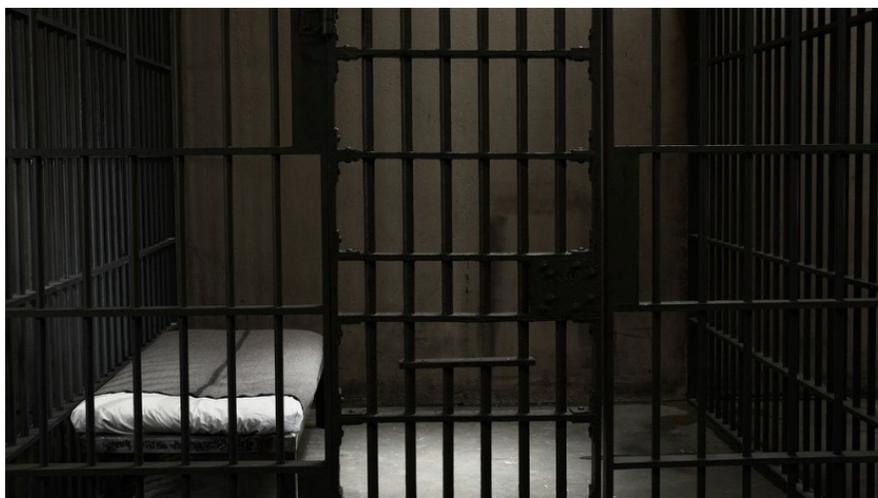


Why Are Prisoners Dying in County Jail?

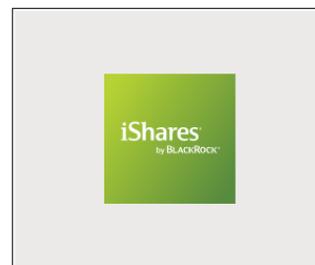
Corizon Health, the biggest company providing medical services to U.S. jails and prisons, faces claims and contract cutoffs

by **Matt Stroud**

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Photograph: Getty Images



For Frank Smart, his mother says, it all came down to one pill.

On Jan. 4, Pittsburgh police alleged that Smart had tried to buy Steelers tickets with counterfeit bills. They arrested him on forgery charges and booked him into Pittsburgh's pretrial lockup, Allegheny County Jail. The next day, Smart was dead—deprived of his epilepsy medicine, according to his mother, Tomi Lynn Harris.

Three additional deaths followed at Allegheny County Jail, the most recent on May 20 and May 21. The county has announced that on Aug. 31, it will end its contract, three years early, with Corizon Health, the biggest company in the nation providing medical services to U.S. jails and prisons. Corizon, with annual revenue of about \$1.5 billion, has faced claims from Arizona to Florida, which it denies. Now, New York City may end its contract with Corizon at Rikers Island, according to the news website DNA Info.

The deaths shine a light on the industry Corizon leads, which staffs jail and prison medical facilities in 27 states and is responsible for as many as 345,000 inmates. The prisoners, many of whom arrive with existing health problems and a history of inadequate care, are also more vulnerable than people with freedom to circulate.

Corizon, based in Brentwood, Tenn., denies Harris's claims and said in a statement that its doctors and nurses "acted quickly and efficiently" to provide her son "with evidence-based and appropriate medical interventions to address his health concern." It said it is "always deeply disappointed when confronted with serious medical occurrences, but they are part of the job of caring for patients in challenging circumstances. As a

physician-led company, our goal is to provide quality healthcare to patients who enter incarceration with more illnesses and chronic conditions than the general population.”

Smart, 39 years old, was epileptic, and he told his jailers as much: He could go into an intense seizure if he didn't take his prescribed medication twice a day. Employees of Corizon ignored those instructions, according to Harris. A little before 11 p.m. on Jan. 5, a day after his booking, Smart seized up. The jail employees on duty mistook his convulsions for resistance, so he was handcuffed and shackled, Harris says and records confirm. About half an hour later, paramedics arrived, and Smart was taken to a nearby hospital unaffiliated with Corizon. There, he was pronounced dead.

“They took my son's seizure and criminalized it,” says Harris. “They couldn't even give him his medicine. Then he's throwing up blood on the floor and they chain him up? People shouldn't be treated like this. Jail's no death sentence.”



Smart's mother protests the death of her son, who was denied his epilepsy medicine in jail, she says.

The average number of deaths at the Pittsburgh jail was double that of comparable jails nationwide in an analysis conducted by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Much of the blame has focused on Corizon, which has overseen medical services there for a little less than two years.

Before Corizon took over, nonprofit Allegheny Correctional Health Services had been in charge of medical facilities at the jail for more than a decade. It isn't clear how many deaths occurred at the jail on its watch. Statistics provided by Allegheny County under Pennsylvania's Right to Know Law showed several sharp and increasing spikes in the number

of deaths over the years, well before Corizon's contract with the jail began. Allegheny County said the statistics were accidentally released early and require review.

An Allegheny County audit of Corizon last year found 14 deficiencies in how the company operated at the Pittsburgh jail. Corizon didn't hire enough staff, the report said, and couldn't document that newly incarcerated inmates had gone through the proper intake procedure. After the county ends its contract with Corizon in August, it will "bring jail medical in house" and "work with contracted partners on specialized services," spokeswoman Amie Downs says.

Corizon has disputed the audit's findings and said the audit, made during a 90-day transition period at the start of its contract, wasn't "balanced, complete or accurate." It said that "typically there are challenges related to the start-up of any jail health care operation, as issues are being identified and resolved."

Corizon, which also owns a pharmaceutical company, PharmaCorr, says it can provide health-care services at costs equal to, or lower than, most government agencies and its corporate competitors. It beat out five competing bids after the county sent out a request for proposals in early 2013. States spend an average of about \$8 billion a year on prison health care, according to a July report by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Moody's Investors Service last year downgraded Corizon's holding company, Valitas Health Services, and said its rating outlook was negative because of "recent contract losses and certain underperforming state Department of Corrections contracts." Further claims have been made against Corizon, which denies any wrongdoing:

- Corizon was fined \$71,000 by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in August over problems in New York City's jail system.
- An inexperienced Corizon nurse in Arizona is alleged to have accidentally contaminated insulin vials, potentially exposing as many as two dozen prisoners to HIV and hepatitis. Those allegations, reported last year, followed an ACLU class-action lawsuit alleging inadequate medical care under Corizon at Arizona prisons and a follow-up report from the American Friends Service Committee alleging that the health-care "situation in our state prisons has reached a crisis point."

- Earlier this month, the *Miami Herald* [reported](#) that the U.S. Department of Justice is investigating a 2012 incident in which a man was killed after prison guards allegedly locked him for hours in a scalding hot shower as punishment for defecating in his cell. The man's family has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the Florida Department of Corrections, as well as Corizon, that claims company employees were aware that guards doled out torturous punishments to mentally ill prisoners.
- In December, the mayor of Washington, D.C., [backed off](#) a plan to contract with Corizon after inmate advocates protested.
- Lawsuits have been filed in Virginia and Alabama alleging inadequate care in Corizon facilities.

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As for Smart's death, "the record obtained from Corizon makes it clear that Frank Smart was to receive 300 mg of Tegretol twice daily. He only received 300 mg once on the day of January 4. As a result, he experienced a seizure late in the evening," says Bret Grote, an attorney with the [Abolitionist Law Center](#) who represents Harris. "Prison staff responded to this punitively, forcibly restraining his limbs, handcuffing and shackling him, turning him over on his stomach, and continuing the forcible restrain until he became

unresponsive."

Grote says Corizon's "business model is to deprive people of health care as a way to make money. That's about as deprived as it gets."

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