



Disability  
Rights  
Oregon

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## Prison Withheld Healthcare from Inmate with Mental Illness, Cognitive Disability Who Died from Treatable Illness

**As Man's Physical Condition Rapidly Worsened, Prison Staff Dismissed His  
Pleas to Be Admitted to Infirmary, Returned Him to His Cell**

Portland, Oregon—A new investigative report released today by Disability Rights Oregon's Mental Health Rights Project reveals medical neglect led to the death of an inmate who experienced mental illness and cognitive disabilities at the Oregon State Penitentiary. The report was issued by the state's leading statewide disability rights organization.

In a matter of weeks, the health of prison inmate Michael Barton, a 54-year-old with a history of mental illness and clear signs of dementia, steeply declined after he was struck by a common viral illness. Despite multiple visits and tearful requests to be admitted to the medical infirmary, he was continually returned to his cell. He stopped eating, was unable to walk or sit up, and ultimately became bedridden and unresponsive.

Nurses ignored his worsening medical crisis, blaming his pleas for help on his mental illness. Mr. Barton's mental illness and cognitive disability prevented him from clearly

communicating, accessing basic needs like drinking water, or performing simple tasks, such as opening an unlocked cell door.

“Michael Barton was denied lifesaving healthcare because of his disabilities. In the week before his death, staff dismissed his alarming physical symptoms, overlooked the precipitous decline of his health, and deprived him of a basic human need for healthcare that would have saved his life,” said Joel Greenberg, staff attorney with Disability Rights Oregon. “ODOC has a legal and moral duty to ensure that the basic needs of all inmates are met. There will be other Michael Barton’s unless ODOC changes a culture that permits its staff to see patients with cognitive and mental health disabilities as less than human.”

ODOC nurses and doctors are the only source of healthcare for the thousands of individuals who are imprisoned in the state. Prisoners with disabilities often face barriers in understanding their environment or effectively communicating with doctors and nurses.

“Dehumanizing people with mental illness creates enduring harm — whether it’s from people being needlessly swept into the criminal justice system to punishing prisoners with solitary confinement. In this case, it led to a man losing his life from a treatable illness,” said Jake Cornett, Executive Director of Disability Rights Oregon. “The lives of people with mental illness have the same inherent value as everyone else’s. This tragic case shows, in the starkest possible terms, how we’re failing to recognize their basic humanity.”

## Solutions

The report calls on the Oregon Department of Corrections to hire an independent prison health expert to review the investigations of Mr. Barton’s death, identify the factors that contributed to this loss of life, and recommend necessary changes to policies and practices. The report calls for the expert to issue a public report on the level of medical care provided to inmates with mental illness and/or developmental disabilities as preparation for helping ODOC implement needed changes within one year of the report’s publication.

## Independent Monitoring of Jails & Prisons

Disability Rights Oregon monitors conditions in jails and prisons across the state to uphold the rights of people with disabilities who are incarcerated in those facilities. In a series of

investigative reports, the advocacy organization has brought to light alarming conditions in Multnomah County jail, the juvenile detention center at NORCOR, and the Behavioral Health Unit at the Oregon State Penitentiary. The findings of the reports have reverberated across the state and led to improved conditions in all of the institutions.

The report, “Independent Investigation into the Death of Michael Barton: Mental Illness & Medical Neglect in an Oregon Prison,” is available on Disability Rights Oregon’s website: [droregon.org](http://droregon.org).

### About Disability Rights Oregon

Disability Rights Oregon upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. The nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential. For more than 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon’s Protection & Advocacy system.

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