



JULY 15 - 21, 2004 -- A PRISON MURDER

A Prison Murder

At Nashville's CCA facility, guards are overworked and an inmate is killed

By John Spragens

The investigation into last week's murder of Metro prison inmate Estelle Richardson is wrapping up, with police expected to issue their report to the district attorney's office by week's end and a possible grand jury indictment to follow. *Scene* sources say that four employees of CCA, which runs the facility where the woman was killed, are on paid administrative leave and that one or more of these officers is central to the criminal inquiry into who was responsible for the blunt-force head trauma that killed the 34-year-old mother of two.

A source close to the investigation says that Richardson, who was incarcerated for the nonviolent crimes of food stamp fraud and probation violation, wasn't raped and that she wasn't necessarily struck with a weapon, but may have been slammed into a hard surface.

Many questions, however, remain unanswered. No one familiar with the investigation will yet specify a timetable for the events that led to her death, leaving open the possibility that Richardson sustained the fatal injury almost 24 hours before anyone called 911. Moreover, police have not released details about any physical altercation.

A few facts have been established so far. Sunday morning, July 4, there was an incident between Richardson and a prison guard or guards in her cell at the CCA-managed Metro-Davidson County Detention Facility. At 5:37 a.m. the following morning, 911 dispatchers received a call from the Harding Place prison: A female inmate was injured and needed medical assistance. Richardson had been isolated from other inmates the entire time, meaning that the only people who had access to her were corrections officers. Her death was ruled a homicide, the result of a skull fracture caused by blunt-force trauma to the head.

Homicide detectives have spent the last week and a half interviewing inmates and CCA employees and gathering and analyzing evidence. Police are now preparing a report that they expect to turn over to the district attorney's office by Friday.

The inmate murder represents another in a series of bumps in the road for CCA, the Nashville-based multinational firm that has been a leader in the formerly thriving for-profit prison industry. CCA cashed in on the incarceration boom of the 1990s, as politicians looked for quick, cheap fixes to problems like drug addiction and recidivism. Private prisons sprang up around the country. CCA, however, overextended itself, became embroiled in scandal, hemorrhaged cash and ultimately decided to restructure its Burton Hills corporate office. In recent years, however, the economic turnaround at the company has been astonishing. Bonuses, profits and the stock price have all risen.

But along the way the lightning rod company has drawn a lot of criticism from folks like former Davidson County Sheriff Hank Hillin, who opposed privatizing Nashville prisons but lost his reelection bid to Gayle Ray, a privatization advocate, in 1995. "With me it's a moral issue," Hillin says. "I don't think people should make money off the discomfort of others and locking them up." Besides, he adds that private prisons are inefficient, politically connected and bottom-line driven—often at the expense of good management.

National studies suggest Hillin may be right. According to a 2003 report by the Open Society Institute, CCA faces "numerous lawsuits and scandals" involving allegations that it systematically fails to provide prisoners with adequate medical care, fails to control violence in its prisons and fails to police employee criminal activity, among other things. Furthermore, the 91-page report documents "self-defeating labor practices" such as understaffing, low wages and insubstantial pension plans, all of which lead to extremely high levels of employee turnover at CCA facilities. Finally, the report casts doubt on the accumulation of academic research that supports private prison industry claims about the safety and efficiency of their facilities. One such study conducted by two prominent Vanderbilt professors, currently posted on CCA's boosterish Web site, was funded by—you guessed it—CCA.

In the Estelle Richardson case, detectives say CCA is cooperating fully with their requests, and this investigation will doubtless limit its scope to the crime scene at hand. A source familiar with the case tells the *Scene*, however, that two of the four corrections officers of interest to the investigation worked double shifts because of a staffing shortage at the detention facility. It's a detail that could prove important to anyone wanting to examine CCA's liability in this situation. News of the prison murder didn't affect the company's stock price last week, but the question of corporate culpability in the death of Estelle Richardson—and others in CCA prisons nationwide—remains an open one.

All content is © 1995-2001 Nashville Scene unless otherwise noted.