



OFFICE OF THE
DISTRICT ATTORNEY
ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA
TODD SPITZER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PRESS RELEASE

Date: October 23, 2024
Case #: 24CF2259

Kimberly Edds
Director of Public Affairs
Office: 714-347-8405, Cell: 714-504-1917
media@ocdapa.org

UPDATED INFORMATION

Orange County District Attorney Seeks to Dismiss Charges Against Santa Ana Corrections Officer Charged with Falsifying Jail Logs after New Evidence Revealed

SANTA ANA, Calif. – The Orange County District Attorney’s Office is seeking to dismiss all charges against a Santa Ana corrections officer accused of falsifying jail logs to cover up the fact that he failed to perform required safety checks on inmate who committed suicide while in the jail. Additional evidence in the case has resulted in a determination that prosecutors can no longer prove this case beyond a reasonable doubt.

Newly assigned prosecutor Deborah Einhorn of the Special Prosecutions Unit undertook a review of the case against Esteban Gonzalez, 39, of Chino, after it was filed last month. After a thorough review of the evidence and a consensual interview with Gonzalez in the presence of his attorney, Einhorn determined that the criminal charges filed against Gonzalez could no longer be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

“Since I became the elected District Attorney, I have remained committed to reviewing additional evidence at every stage of a criminal case to determine whether we can still meet our ethical burden of proving a case beyond a reasonable doubt,” said Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer. “When we find that we can no longer meet our burden of proof, as we did in this case due to the diligence of Special Prosecutions Deputy District Attorney Deborah Einhorn, we will ask the court to grant a dismissal of those charges based on a lack of sufficient evidence. The presumption of innocence until proven guilty is a cornerstone of our criminal justice system and it is one that must never be forgotten.”

From the original September 2024 press release:

An internal investigation by the Santa Ana Police Department following the inmate’s suicide revealed the discrepancies between the jail logs and the safety checks that video surveillance confirmed were never performed and the case was submitted to the Orange County District Attorney’s Office for review.

Esteban Gonzalez, 39, of Chino, was charged last month with three felony counts of altering public documents while working at the Santa Ana Detentions Facility in 2021. He faces a maximum sentence of 6 years in state prison if convicted of all charges.

On June 25, 2021, Correctional Officer Gonzalez was responsible for overseeing inmates in Santa Ana Jail's Module 4C. Video surveillance shows another correctional officer performing an inmate safety check on inmate Darryle Samuel at 9:31 a.m. before ending her shift and leaving Module 4C under the responsibility of Gonzalez.

According to video surveillance, Gonzalez did not conduct subsequent safety checks until the inmates were released for lunch around 10:50 AM. Samuel did not report to lunch. Module 4C inmates finished lunch and returned to their cells around 11:13am with several inmate workers left behind to clean up and vacuum.

At about 11:18 a.m., an inmate worker discovered Samuel hanging from a bedsheet in his cell and called Gonzalez for help. Gonzalez and three other officers attempted lifesaving measures while waiting for paramedics from the Orange County Fire Authority to arrive. While firefighters performed lifesaving measures, Gonzalez is seen performing inmate safety checks and then returning to the computerized jail logs and altering them.

In the Santa Ana Police Department computerized jail logs, Gonzalez documented that he performed inmate safety checks at 10:16 a.m., and 10:18 a.m. in contradiction with video surveillance which showed no safety checks were performed at those times. These safety checks and a purported check at 10:50 a.m. at the start of lunch were noted as "code 4" for "all clear" with the 10:50 a.m. safety check also coded "no refusals" despite the fact that Samuel never reported for lunch and was likely dead at that time.

The internal investigation by the Santa Ana Police Department revealed that while firefighters were trying to revive Samuel, Gonzalez deleted his previously inputted 10:50 a.m. safety check entry designating "code 4" and "no refusals."

The Orange County District Attorney's Office reviews all custodial deaths in Orange County to determine if the law enforcement agency is criminally liable for the death with the exception of the Huntington Beach Police Department, which contracts with the Orange County Sheriff's Department.

On July 27, 2022, the Orange County District Attorney's Office issued its legal conclusions regarding the custodial death of Samuel which determined that while the inmate's suicide was intentional after finding out that his girlfriend was pregnant by another man a few hours prior there was not any evidence that could be proven beyond a reasonable doubt that anyone was criminally liable for Samuel's death. As a result of a review of the jail logs, criminal charges were filed against Gonzalez for falsifying those records.

"Inmates depend on correctional officers for every aspect of their safety and well-being and in this case Correctional Officer Gonzalez failed to carry out that most basic duty," said Orange District Attorney Todd Spitzer. "The callousness involved in desperately try to alter the jail log while paramedics were trying to revive Mr. Darryle is unconscionable. This is a betrayal of trust given to correctional officers and we will continue to hold law enforcement officers accountable to the fullest extent of the law when they break the law."

Deputy District Attorney Deborah Einhorn of the Special Prosecutions Unit is prosecuting this case.

###