

## How to Report on Jail Deaths

A few tips from John:

- Inside sources is a game-changer. See if you can get your editor to give you a full day just for developing sources: guards and sheriff officials who are recently retired or even still working. Facebook, LinkedIn are obvious and typically productive ways to start.
- See if the sheriff's dep or the corrections officers have a union. Their PIOs or members are often more forthcoming
- With long term investigations, the aim with sources is not to bag interviews but to develop relationships.
- Dig into county or state oversight. Some states have jail oversight boards. Most counties have at least some oversight (meaning they do audits or at least produce reports or file memos) about jail contracts and conditions
- Never forget the stakes, the humanity of the people who are locked up

A few tips from Tennessee:

- Familiarize yourself with how oversight of in-custody deaths is supposed to work in your state. The lack of oversight might be the story.
- Make sure the family of the deceased knows that your story is coming out and what details will be included. Jails often don't communicate to family members how people die. Reading your story shouldn't be the first time families are made aware of the details.
- In-custody deaths are hard on jail staff too. Often a lack of resources and training makes deaths more likely. What are the structural factors contributing to dangerous conditions for jail staff and incarcerated people?
- Don't fixate on deaths related just to the use of force, suicide and overdoses. Deaths due to "natural causes" can also reveal neglect and structural problems.
- Take care of yourself.