

Support independent, nonprofit journalism.

Become a member of The Marshall Project during our fall member drive. Our journalism has tremendous power to drive change, but we can't do it without your support.

[DONATE NOW](#)

07.29.2021

LIFE INSIDE

A Filthy New Orleans Jail Made My Son Sick. The 'Cruel and Unusual' Medical Treatment at Angola Prison Killed Him.

This spring, a judge ruled that the healthcare at the Louisiana State Penitentiary violated prisoners' Eighth Amendment rights. Lois Ratcliff tells the horrifying story of her son Farrell's decline and death.

By **LOIS RATCLIFF** as told by **JAMILES LARTEY**

Perspectives from those who work and live in the criminal justice system. [Sign up](#) to receive "Life Inside" emailed to you every week.

I spent 40 years working in healthcare, mostly as a certified nursing assistant, taking care of elderly and infirmed patients. I watched many people that I had spent years caring for as their health deteriorated, who ultimately passed away. None of that prepared me to watch my own son grow ill and die in prison, on the receiving end of what a federal court recently ruled was a cruel and unusual lack of care.

My son Farrell Sampier was 45 when he was sentenced to 20 years in the Louisiana State prison system. He died at 51, shackled to a hospital bed.

Before his arrest, Farrell worked two jobs at popular New Orleans restaurants. He was an energetic father and young grandfather to a newborn. He lived for his kids.

In a sense, he died for them, too. Farrell wasn't a violent man, but like any father I know, he wasn't going to stand around while someone threatened and abused his daughter and his grandbaby. That was how Farrell wound up in a shooting with Antonio Miller, the father of his grandchild.

Antonio routinely threatened Farrell's daughter — my granddaughter — with violence. Court records show that he once sent her a picture of their child next to a pistol. It was meant as a warning and as a threat, and Farrell took it as one. When Farrell confronted Antonio over his behavior, words were exchanged, guns were pulled, and Farrell shot him to death.

Between the time of his arrest and the plea deal that sent him to Angola prison on a 20-year sentence for manslaughter, Farrell remained behind bars at Orleans Parish Prison, the New Orleans jail. It was there that the funny, active, energetic son I knew fell gravely ill. First his feet went numb, then the numbness traveled up his legs and started to impede his movement. By the time Farrell was transferred to prison, he was using a wheelchair, but hadn't yet received the kind of medical attention that could lead to a diagnosis.

Eventually, he would be diagnosed with transverse myelitis, a neurological disorder of the spine typically caused by infection. Farrell and I both suspected the disease was triggered by unsanitary conditions in the jail. Around the same time his symptoms began, the city of New Orleans was hammered hard by Hurricane Isaac. Farrell told me that the storm had pushed ankle-deep sewage water into many of the cells.

When they brought Farrell to Angola, they put him in hospice care. He and I were both confused. He didn't have a diagnosis yet, but there was no reason to believe he was terminally ill or in the last weeks of his life. As it turns out, Angola uses their hospice program, [featured in rosy documentaries](#), to manage care for patients perfectly capable of treatment and even full recovery, as Farrell was. Most transverse myelitis patients recover at least partially, and some completely.

It hurt — the idea of my 45-year-old son in hospice — but I thought, at least there, Farrell would be well taken care of. I cared for many terminally ill patients over my career, and I hadn't seen a bad hospice yet — until I saw the one at Angola.

I wasn't expecting it to be the Holiday Inn. But even basic cleanliness and medical precautions were absent. Nurses would routinely give Farrell medication without gloves. I remember one nurse who was so foul smelling, I complained to the warden. He would drip mucus from his nose onto my son's body — inches from Farrell's open bedsores — with no mask and seemingly no concern or awareness.

The unit often used old, cut-up prison blankets as wash rags. In some ways, I felt relieved that Farrell was paralyzed. At least he couldn't feel it when nurses went to clean his stage-four bedsore with scratchy, stiff, unsanitized scraps. Often there was no bleach or detergent to clean surfaces, just rags and water.

The whole ward smelled like feces. When I'd visit, I'd try to eat with Farrell — something simple, something human. Most of the time, the nauseating smell made that nearly impossible. The table we ate at was so dirty that inmates would lay down clean diapers — the only sanitary items around — just to have a surface to eat on that wasn't riddled with germs.

Transverse myelitis makes it hard for patients to control their bowels and bladder. Farrell's paralysis made it impossible. He had a Foley catheter placed to empty his bladder. Normally, this kind of device is replaced every few weeks, or sooner if an infection develops. But Farrell's catheter was left in for months at a time. The area around it became infected so viciously and so many times that the head of Farrell's penis split in two.

Farrell had to beg for the simplest items of care. He waited weeks for a trapeze bar above his bed so he could use his arms to turn himself and prevent bedsores or to maneuver into his wheelchair from bed. Some nights, he would call me crying because they wouldn't give him the medication he needed. He had blisters on his hands from using his wheelchair, and staff refused to get him adequate gloves to help with mobility. He wound up trading another inmate for a pair used in the fields.

When he could get what he needed, the victories were short-lived. For weeks, Farrell requested an inflatable donut to take pressure off his bedsore. One day, while I visited, he asked a new nurse who promptly found one and brought it to him. He told me, "She's not gonna be over here for long. Every time we get somebody to really try to help, they transfer them." Sure enough, shortly after, that nurse was gone.

Farrell's starchy, protein-deficient diet impeded his possibility for recovery and exacerbated his diabetes. His blood sugar was rarely measured. One time when I came to visit, it was in the 500s, a

level high enough to trigger a diabetic coma.

I was living in Atlanta when Farrell was in prison. I went to see my son every week or two. If I could find a cheap flight I would fly, but most of the time I drove the eight hours to New Orleans on a Thursday after work, then another two the next morning to the Angola state penitentiary. I drove in the rain and fog. Sometimes I didn't know if I was driving in a ditch or on the highway, but nothing was going to keep me from seeing my son — unless the prison was on lockdown. I remember at least five times I made the trip just to be turned away. Some days I would hear him screaming in agony before I even made it inside the building. Farrell said his condition caused bouts of pain so intense it felt like his bones were cooking in a 1,500-degree oven. Many days, the helplessness of seeing my son languish like that was too much to bear. The truth is, I wanted to kill myself. But I knew that without me, he'd have no one to visit, no one to advocate for his care, and he would suffer even more.

Farrell died in 2019, after having a stroke and a heart attack. He had just testified in a federal trial against Angola administrators over the inadequate care that inmates received. On the last car ride to see my son, I hollered the whole eight hours. It was living hell right on Earth.

In March, a federal judge ruled that the inadequate healthcare at Angola amounted to a violation of the Eighth Amendment, which bars the infliction of cruel and unusual punishment. Farrell's testimony to the court was cited seven times in the decision, which also found that the prison violated the Americans with Disabilities Act.

It's vindication for a judge to see it that way, and I'm proud this decision is part of Farrell's legacy. But you don't ever get over something like this. Although I may have good days, I'll never be the same again.

The Louisiana Department of Corrections did not respond to a request for comment.