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Inmate once raped by prison guard found dead in cell

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Priscilla Elizabeth Chavez, 29, a Utah State Prison inmate who won a \$1.4 million civil lawsuit and a criminal conviction against a corrections officer who raped her, was found dead in her cell Friday, Sept. 21, 2012. (Matt Powers, Deseret News)

UTAH STATE PRISON — A Utah State Prison inmate who won a \$1.4 million civil lawsuit and a criminal conviction against a corrections officer who raped her was found dead in her cell Friday.

Priscilla Elizabeth Chavez, 29, had a long criminal history that mostly involved a volatile relationship with law enforcement. But 11 years ago, she was in the news for being the victim of a crime by a law enforcer. Former corrections officer Louis

Poleate was sentenced to five years in prison for raping Chavez in 2001 while she was an 18-year-old inmate.

In 2010, a federal judge awarded Chavez \$1.4 million in damages for what he called a brutal and vicious rape.

Since that incident, Chavez was sent back to the Utah State Prison after subsequent convictions. Her mother claims her daughter was the target of retaliation there. Three weeks ago, Irene Chavez said she received a letter from a female inmate who was housed near her daughter's cell. The inmate claimed her daughter was being forced to endure constant abuse.

Irene Chavez said her daughter also sent a letter to her attorney, Randy Phillips, asking for help.

"She wrote to her lawyer, 'Don't let me die, do something before it's too late.' Now, it's too late," an emotional Chavez said Friday. "So

maybe God took her because she was suffering so bad, and I couldn't do anything."

Priscilla's sister, Francene Chavez, also spent 10 years in prison and said she saw the abuse of her sister first hand.

Unified police officer Levi Hughes said his department is investigating Chavez's death. She had a cell by herself and was found dead about 6:30 a.m., he said. There were no obvious signs of trauma.



Francene Chavez, left, talks about the death her sister, Priscilla Elizabeth Chavez, during an interview Friday, Sept. 21, 2012, with her mother, Irene, right. Priscilla Elizabeth Chavez, 29, a Utah State Prison inmate who won a \$1.4 million civil lawsuit and a criminal conviction against a corrections officer who raped her, was found dead in her cell Friday, Sept. 21, 2012. (Matt Powers, Deseret News)

He also noted that she had a "medical history," but he would not go into detail.

The medical examiner will determine a cause of death, Hughes said. He also noted the department did not have any police reports of Chavez being abused at the prison in recent years.

Priscilla Chavez said after she came forward with the allegations against Poleate, other prison guards retaliated against her by dumping bleach in her cell and spraying her sheets with chemical sprays.

In his 2010 decision ordering Poleate to pay Chavez damages, U.S. District Judge Clark Waddoups said, "If there is any accuracy to (the woman's) descriptions of having guards retaliate against her after Mr. Poleate was punished for raping her, those guards will also be given something to think about with this damage award."

Chavez was serving time for convictions of conspiracy to disarm a peace officer, a second-degree felony, and attempted assault by a prisoner, a class A misdemeanor.

For more than 10 years, Chavez was in and out of the court system mainly on charges of assault by a prisoner, assault on a corrections officer or damaging a jail cell, according to Utah court records. Many of her charges were ultimately dismissed or combined with sentences she was already serving. Her arrests were so frequent that she was referred to the Utah State Hospital for tests.

But several of her cases also ended in convictions.

- In 1999, Chavez was sentenced to up to five years in prison for felony assault by a prisoner. Three other counts were dismissed as part of the plea deal. Nine days after she was sentenced, she was involved in another assault by a prisoner incident, according to court records. Eight days after that she was charged in a similar incident and yet again a couple of months later.
- In January of 2000, Chavez was again sentenced to up to five years in prison for felony assault by a prisoner. She was back in court facing charges of assault by a prisoner or assault on a corrections officer in 2001, 2003, 2004 and 2005. While some of the cases were dismissed, in 2001 and 2003 she was sentenced to up to five years in prison, according to state records.
- In 2007, she was convicted of misdemeanor disorderly conduct.

- In 2008, Chavez was again charged with assault against a police officer and initially pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, according to court records. The case was eventually dismissed.
- In 2009, she was sentenced to one to 15 years in prison for conspiracy to disarm a peace officer and one year in a separate case of attempted assault by a prisoner.

Francene Chavez said her sister suffered from mental illness, which got worse after she was raped in prison. She admitted her sister would often lash out at corrections officers.

Irene Chavez claimed her daughter was on suicide watch and was supposed to be checked on by corrections officers every 15 minutes. She also claimed her daughter had a tumor in her head that she believes was caused by the abuse she endured from officials.

"They killed her. I kept warning people they're retaliating against her. They killed her," Chavez said in tears.

She said the inmate who wrote to her claimed her daughter was often handcuffed, shackled and "hog tied," and would have a pillow case put over her head. She claimed her daughter would often talk about suicide.

"No human being should be put through what your daughter is going through," Chavez said the inmate wrote in her letter.

The Department of Corrections released a brief statement Friday.

"The department offers its condolences to the family and to our own staff who knew and worked with her. The department takes submitted reports and concerns seriously. If there are specific reports that would enable the department to further investigate any claims being made, the agency certainly would do that here as it routinely does in any case. Corrections will continue to fully cooperate with Unified police as they conduct their investigation. Again, the department would emphasize its condolences to the family and to staff dealing with this difficult situation."

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