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Updates for October 18th

7 Oct - Where I'm From, Where I've Been By Dan Baker

We are happy to be printing the latest by Dan Baker!

MORE:

I was born in Boynton Beach and grew up in Jupiter FL. My mom was an Irish nurse and she met Glenn Baker when she was a stripper and he was a Palm Beach County Sheriff deputy, where Trump lives. This is important because he was a corrupt cop who shook down drug dealers to steal their drugs and he gave them to my mom, who became addicted to opiates, whereas before she was an alcoholic. He used this addiction to get full custody of me, despite the fact that I am the result of an affair between her and a man named Wesley Jolly, who I've never met. He wanted my mom to get an abortion, but she wanted a baby, so she didn't. I support women's right to get abortions if they want. So, Glenn Baker took me from my mom and she eventually overdosed on fentanyl. He raised me to be a racist white supremacist Christian nationalist but before my mom died, she deradicalized me and taught me basic first aid and compassion. She took me to work with her taking care of people in the black community and at hospice and at home care. I also would volunteer with her at soup kitchens on Thanksgiving, and I went to volunteer projects and mission trips to the Dominican Republic and Haiti, where I worked with the outreach dentist to help clean people's teeth who otherwise wouldn't have access to a dentist. I also worked with the agriculture project and was embarrassed by how spoiled I was and how the locals ran circles around me with skill and grace and hospitality. They were very happy with very little and I was an unhappy American with so much. I also was a cub scout and a boy scout and spent a lot of time volunteering with them to pick up trash from forests and roads and to plant trees. Glenn taught me to hunt, shoot, fight and so on. He would make daily jokes and repeat the same stories about how they killed black men and immigrants from Guatemala, Mexico and Cuba. He would also repeat jokes about beating women. There is a militia at Church in the Farms which sends people to the Texas border to shoot people as they try to cross the border. They consider themselves to be heroes and they tried to recruit me after I got out of the army. I declined. I ran away /was kicked out because I smoked weed at 17. Having been trained my whole childhood I felt my best option was to join the U.S. army airborne infantry. In my unit, the 82nd Airborne Division, 2/504 Parachute Infantry Regiment, soldiers in my squad, 2nd platoon, 2nd squad, were bragging about having shot a civilian truck driver on Christmas eve in Afghanistan around 2004 or 2005 at a checkpoint roadblock they set up. Specialist Lewandowski said the Afghan man "ruined their Christmas" because he was "dying like a bitch". They told him to "shut the fuck up and die like a man" then they smothered him with a pillow because the medics had made them take turns guarding him while he took all night to die. One time when Sgt. Camp was drunk, he cried to me about looking at the Afghan man's family photos from his wallet that night. Specialist Lindon told me he got an erection from shooting civilians. Then guys in my unit were bragging about how they raped and pillaged and murdered civilians and that they would do the same when we deployed to Iraq. I wanted no part of that and they said that if I didn't "cover" for them while they "got some pussy" they "would kill" me. I went AWOL when they deployed, absent without leave, when they deployed to Iraq and then turned myself in and was kicked out with a "general discharge under other than honorable conditions for serious misconduct/offense". It's not as bad a dishonorable but it might as well be. McDonalds and Walmart won't hire me. My unit went on to the Iraq without me and committed the "Mahmoodiya gang rape massacre," where they raped and murdered a teenage girl and her family and neighbors who witnessed them.

After I got back from the army I was basically shunned by my family but not at first. I initially tried to go to college for horticulture management but I couldn't afford the fees and my "family" wouldn't help me because they wanted to buy a boat and go see the Grand Canyon, and they put me out on the street again. I did manage to complete yoga teacher training and I've been teaching for about 10 years now. This was one

of the most meaningful experiences of my life and has shaped my personality and ethic more than anything else. I was still trying to balance my 'militant personality' with my inclinations towards a meaningful communal life, so I became an armed security guard. I only worked at gated communities because I don't care for banks or money. I then was disillusioned further by the way the wealthy people who can afford armed guards treat people. I ended up giving away most of my material possessions and going of to live in the wood with the Rainbow Gathering Family- hippies in the woods. My intention was to renounce capitalism and live a life of service. Jesus said that if you want to follow him and help people you should sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor but very few people who claim to be Christians actually do this, so there are very few real Christians. In the summer of 2012 I wanted to take a leap of faith towards a meaningful life guided by God so I went to a national gathering in Deer Lodge, Montana. It was very nice and pretty much what I was looking for. But having been a spoiled middle class white American I had difficulty adjusting to life on the road and eventually joined the Hare Krishna's to get some stability. I traveled around the country to various Hare Krishna Hindu temples and ended up back in Florida in Tallahassee. I worked at the Krishna Lunch program at FSU and also went to Gainesville to work at the Krishna Lunch there a few times. I would drift away and return to the Hare Krishna's in Tallahassee over ideological differences and the strict lifestyle of Krishna devotees (they expect live-in residents to be celibate and totally sober and not to question anything, which is basically a very pleasant and harmless cult, usually). I worked and lived in Tallahassee for the last 10 years, sometimes homeless, sometimes in apartments. One year I lived in a shack I built in a friend's back yard, and the next year I lived at a jiu-jitsu school. I began to train and compete in tournaments while I was homeless and unemployed because I was very frustrated but I wanted to stay peaceful and out of trouble, so I would exhaust my ego on the jiu-jitsu mats. I have long had this idea of myself as a kind of warrior monk type personality. This entails helping other on a daily basis as a lifestyle and to make a living, simple living, being vegetarian, and now vegan, practicing martial arts and yoga. It also involves nonviolence as a general policy, except in cases of self-defense, and to beg for one's daily bread instead of resorting to anything unethical. Several times, ideally once a year, I would go to a yoga retreat to fast for a week and study spiritual texts, meditate, do yoga and so on. To help others I've teamed up with friends who helped me when I was homeless and together, we would find other homeless people and feed them and provide clothes and sleeping bags, tarps and whatever else we could afford to provide. In Tallahassee frat boys once set my friend on fire while he slept outside. He was a homeless Marine named Dennis, and I helped fundraise money for his recovery and I would check on him daily and bring him things he needed. Around this time, I was usually selling carnations on the street corner and I saw Eric Garner on the news, being strangled by cops. This radicalized me. I also went to a protest in Gainesville to bodyguard my friends, at their request, who wanted to protest against Richard Spencer, a racist cracker who riles up Nazis to riot and who caused the Charlottesville riot that resulted in the death of Heather Heyer. I was leaving the Gainesville protest against Spencer when three of his supporters, who came to Florida from Texas with firearms, pulled up, shouted "Seig Hail" and "Hail Hitler" and then shot at my friends. No one was hurt and those guys went to prison. So before this I was apolitical and avoided all polarization. After this I felt that I had to pick a side and I would stand with people who opposed fascism, with Antifa, with the democrats, liberals, anarchists, socialists, even with communists- I would stand against Trump, the KKK, the Proud Boys, the Oathkeepers, and all their similar groups and allies. In Florida I was getting death threats from Tallahassee based neo-Nazi group "Republic of Florida" which was founded and run by Jordan Jereb, who bragged that he trained school shooter Nicholas Cruz. I was getting frustrated because no law enforcement group who is in Tallahassee would do anything about this guy or his friends because many of them are Tallahassee cops, until he bragged about training Nicholas Cruz. At this point I was ready to take matters into my own hands but I decided that it would be better to go to Rojava than to go to war against other Americans. I have always considered myself an anarchist, and generally on the left, but I didn't really know what this meant in detail, I didn't study any ideology or learn about the rich heritage we share with comrades all over the world.

I reached out to the People's Protection Unit in Rojava and they emailed me some pamphlets by Abdullah Ocalan, which I studied and wrote book reports on at their request. They also sent a questionnaire. They liked my answers and told me the risks and said I could come join them if I was willing to die, be maimed or paralyzed for the revolution. I bought a plane ticket to Iraq and the Kurds picked me up and took me to Syria and Rojava. We waited for enough people to arrive to start a class then trained for several months.

Even before the Academy started we were studying language and discussing ideology, and people went off on their own to exercise. During the Academy we learned about feminism, environmentalism, Democratic Confederatism, the history, and herstory, of the Middle East and basic military training. We also helped build a hospital, spent time gardening, picking up trash, animal rescue, community service and things like that. When we completed the Academy we went to the International base and others came in behind us to start their Academy. Another class had graduated just before us and went to the front lines. A friend named Shahine was killed by a rocket. He was also a vegetarian, and from France. We held a huge funeral ceremony for him and all the locals came out to line the roads between the hospital morgue and the border crossing where his family came to pick up his body. I also met the family of Jac Holms and Anna Campbell, and that was very meaningful for me. I was given the war name Alishare Qerechoke (spelled Aliser Qerecox). I was given the name Alishare but I chose Qerechoke because of the background of the hill that shares this name and also because Shahin's last name was Qerechoke and so was Anna Campbell's war name- Helin Qerechoke. I was deeply moved by this experience and the camaraderie of the Kurds, the Arabs and Internationals, especially the commune. I was reminded of the mission trips to the Dominican Republic where I felt the shortcomings of my own background, and I really pushed myself to meet the needs and expectations of the community. I was very distracted by the stress of adapting to the different culture, language and climate. After six months of training with the International Battalion we went to the front lines. We fought day and night for two weeks in the Battle of Deir Ez Zor in Baghuz. On the second week I was knocked unconscious by a rocket then I woke up and helped to save several wounded friends by bandaging their wounds and taking turns carrying them to safety. During this scramble other friends were wounded and we barely made it to safety because the front line had collapsed under the enemy's final attack, as they covered the rest of the enemy's escape into civilian populations and the desert. When we came back from the front I was told that Glenn Baker was dying and I could go home to help and be with him. I wanted to stay and fight but they said the fight was basically over. I could stay if I wanted or go take care of Glenn and come back if I wanted. I decided to go back to the U.\$ and then come back, but I haven't been able to get back to Rojava due to many circumstances. I am ashamed I have not returned to Rojava.

When I got back the U.\$ was chaotic because of Trump's agitation and his encouraging racism. I helped take care of Glenn until he died then I traveled around the U.\$, going to different George Floyd protests, Climate Change protests and was in Nashville and Seattle as a street medic for the protests there. I helped to save a kid who was shot while he and his friends were attacking the CHAZ/CHOP barricades. Then I came back to Florida. Google the rest!

7 Oct - Alabama Prison Strikers Demand Change Despite Severe Retaliation

Across the state of Alabama, where the state's longest-ever strike is currently ongoing at Warrior Met Coal after over 18 months, another historic labor stoppage is in its third week.

MORE:

by Haley Czarnek (*Popular Resistance*)

'Society Has Shut Down On Us.'

Thousands of incarcerated people at every major male prison in Alabama have refused to report to their work assignments.

"The message that we are sending is, the courts have shut down on us, the parole board has shut down on us," a strike organizer who goes by Swift Justice told a reporter for independent news site *Unicorn Riot*. "This society has long ago shut down on us. So basically, if that's the case, and you're not wanting us to return back to society, you can run these facilities yourselves."

"It makes no sense for us to continue to contribute to our own oppression," Kinetik Justice, another striking prisoner, told *Unicorn Riot*. "We finance our own incarceration through our free labor and spending every dime we get in the canteens and so forth. It is our money and our family's money that is used to keep us incarcerated and oppressed like this."

The strike has its roots in years of inside organizing. In 2016, the Free Alabama Movement successfully led a 10-day nationwide strike that aimed to spotlight how the 13th Amendment has allowed the institution of slavery to transform itself, in spite of its abolition on paper. (The 13th Amendment banned slavery and involuntary servitude, "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.") That strike spanned at least 40 facilities in 24 states.

The deplorable conditions across the state's prisons also make them particularly dangerous. According to a 2020 lawsuit filed by the Justice Department, the Alabama prison system "fails to provide adequate protection from prisoner-on-prisoner violence and prisoner-on-prisoner sexual abuse, fails to provide safe and sanitary conditions, and subjects prisoners to excessive force at the hands of prison staff."

Organizers have crafted a list of demands, aimed primarily at Republican Governor Kay Ivey and the Alabama legislature. These demands include:

- Establishing mandatory parole criteria to guarantee parole to all eligible
- Repealing Alabama's Habitual Felony Offender Act, which requires stricter punishment for those with prior felony convictions among other mandates
- Eliminating life-without-parole sentences
- Ensuring eligible persons receive "good time"—incentive time shaved off a sentence earned through good behavior
- Create a statewide conviction integrity unit to investigate possible wrongful convictions

Unbroken Line to Slavery

Swift and Kinetik argue that there is an unbroken line extending from the institution of slavery as it existed in the antebellum era to the modern prison industrial complex.

"Alabama wishes for its slaves to remain passive and obedient to continue bringing millions of dollars of profit from our backs and blood," Swift said in an October 1 press release.

If slavery is characterized, as sociologist Orlando Patterson contends, primarily by social death, the thread is clear: a person who becomes an inmate gets a number for a name, loses access to communication channels uncontrolled by the institution, is typically moved far from their family, and exists according to the dictates of guards, at least some of whom have been charged with or convicted of assaulting those in their care. Death, in the literal sense, is also a constant feature of Alabama's prisons, and the full extent of the violence is hard to measure given ADOC's tendency to provide no updates.

Brutal System

Politicians and administrators continue to find new ways to make a system widely condemned for its brutality even more brutal. The parole board, for instance, has drastically reduced grants of conditional release; 46 percent of applications were denied in 2017, but that number skyrocketed to 84 percent in 2021. The average for the decade prior to 2021 was 37 percent, with the drastic increase in part reflecting the fact that the board very often declines to follow their own guidelines, choosing instead to keep more people locked up even as the Department of Justice has found that the prisons are unconstitutionally overcrowded.

While the criminal justice system disproportionately targets communities of color at every point in the process, the racial disparities in parole denials are still increasing; a Montgomery Advertiser article reports "grants for Black applicants dropping at a much faster rate in 2020 and 2021 than for whites." As officials strip away any remaining hope many have of ever seeing the outside world again, what remains for inmates to focus on is the trauma the carceral system inflicts.

Strikebreaking

Perhaps unsurprisingly, ADOC's strikebreaking tactics are extreme. For instance, where the hedge funds that own Warrior Met Coal have made clear they intend to metaphorically "starve out" the miners in Brookwood, ADOC is employing actual starvation. In addition to adopting a so-called "holiday meal schedule" of only two meals at facilities all around the state, prisoners say those meals are made up of trays containing no hot food and limited nutrients. Numerous images of items such as two "sandwiches" constructed from only cold slices of bread and cheese have made the rounds on social media.

ADOC claims this is merely because they have lost most of their supply of free, forced labor, although it is questionable how much extra labor it would take to serve up a larger scoop of mush or add more bread slices to a tray.

Even beyond the ongoing starvation, prison officials have forced inmates to provide scab labor. If someone on work release (i.e. those allowed to work outside the prison, returning when their shift is complete) declines to cross the metaphorical picket line, prisoners say they are at risk of immediately losing their release status and being moved to Donaldson, a prison notorious—even by Alabama standards—for its extreme violence.

A person brought in from the North Alabama Work Release Center to take the place of the striking Alabama prisoners at Limestone told his story to Kinetik on video, expressing solidarity with the strikers; not even two hours after the video was posted online, the person who recorded the footage, Kinetik, was beaten by guards and locked in solitary confinement—not for the first time. Even for those who are prepared both to face violence from guards and to lose their hard-won work release status, the tremendous isolation folks on the inside face makes it difficult to find out about the strike in the first place.

Thousands of people have built solidarity in these most unlikely conditions. The labor movement depends on all of us recognizing that there is more that connects us than divides us, and that there are many more of us ready to fight for our rights than there are bosses and oppressors.

"Regardless of where we are," Swift said on Saturday, "we are humans."

October 12th - Alabama inmates file federal court motion over 'retaliatory tactics' by prison staff during protest

by Matt Kroschel (WAAY)

Attorneys representing 37 inmates in Alabama prison facilities are demanding a federal judge intervene and force Alabama Department of Corrections staff to stop what they claim are "retaliatory tactics" in response to the inmate labor strike.

The inmates claim in their amended motion filed Oct. 7 that they all suffer from medical conditions, including diabetes, hypertension, sleep apnea, seizures disorders and others. Inmates said disruptions to meals and medicine inside some state prisons mean they are getting sick and civil rights are being violated.

The plaintiff-intervenors are asking to be added to the ongoing Department of Justice court case against ADOC. They claim conditions have gotten worse since the original DOJ complaints came down.

They allege an injunction is the only way to force ADOC to resume normal operations, but ADOC reports most facilities are back to normal operations already.

In an unprecedented move that started Sept. 26, thousands of inmates organized inside state prisons and refused to work assigned jobs, including cooking food and doing laundry. The work stoppage led to delays in meal service and other important facility functions, according to multiple sources inside these facilities.

Legal expert Will League said the inmates found a pressure point on the corrections system.

"We don't want to starve people. We are not a third-world country. The idea of limiting food is so antiquated, and if we need to get more tax money to hire guards — you've heard about short staffing — it definitely needs to be addressed," League said Wednesday. "They definitely have standing to enter into this lawsuit to not be treated in violation of the Eighth Amendment against cruel and unusual punishment."

Inmates claim work stoppages could again resume systemwide.

"The peaceful inmate work stoppage has demonstrated just how close to a tipping point ADOC facilities are. Within hours of not having access to unpaid inmate labor, Defendants claimed an inability to retain regular feeding schedules and medical care," the court filing reads.

The plaintiff-intervenors are also seeking a temporary restraining order. The judge ordered ADOC to respond to this motion by Oct. 14.

October 14th - Striking prisoners shared the following statement

via *Unicorn Riot*

Since the peaceful labor strike within the Alabama Department of Corrections began on September 26, those who are striking have faced relentless attempts to break our spirit by the correctional staff. We have been starved, placed into solitary confinement and suicide cells as retaliation, and forced into dangerous situations as ADOC tries to turn us against each other. In spite of this, international media and activists have turned their attention toward Alabama and its inhumane treatment of and policies around incarcerated individuals. The world is watching.

We will not relent under these retaliatory tactics. Our brothers, particularly those with health conditions, addiction and mental health challenges, have faced challenges not only to their psychological well-being but also their very lives.

Especially alarming is ADOC'S intentional "bird feeding" food deprivation, which presents a severe health risk to those who suffer from diabetes and other illnesses that require a wellness diet.

Unlike the ADOC we value life.

By no means are we waving a white flag of defeat. We are still demanding our concerns be heard before our Legislators and other elected officials. We also demand that our outside representatives be given a platform to be our voice and the public hear our arguments.

At this time, some have chosen to return to work to ensure that ADOC does not continue to target the most vulnerable in our population. Others will continue to strike.

We will continue to escalate our strike, peacefully, until our voices are heard.

9 Oct - Report on October 8, 2022 Free Leonard Peltier Event in NYC

A lot of important information was shared by ILPDC Secretary Dan Battaglia, Lead Attorney Kevin Sharp, Paul Berg and Lenny Foster.

MORE:

If you missed this important event, you can watch it at youtu.be/Me1MiqRECfA

Keep the pressure on President Biden to DO THE RIGHT THING!

White House hotline (line open 11:00am-3:00pm EST, Tuesday-Thursday): 202.456.1111

Emessage: whitehouse.gov/contact | Tweet Biden: @POTUS • @joebiden

A national Change.org petition is calling for Leonard Peltier's hospitalization and freedom:
[Chng.it/xChWLC5vT6](https://change.org/petitions/Leonard-Peltier-should-be-released-from-prison)

10 Oct - Upcoming Events and Court Date for Mumia Abu-Jamal

Mumia Abu-Jamal has been a US Political Prisoner since December 1981.

MORE:

This October 26, 2022, a judge in Philadelphia will decide if Mumia's case from over 40 years ago - a case full of glaring injustices - can be re-opened due to new evidence.

That "new" evidence is 6 boxes of papers, related to Mumia's case, that were hidden in the Philadelphia District Attorney's (prosecutor's) office, dating back to Mumia's trial. While those papers were hidden, including, for instance, a letter from one of the bribed witnesses asking the DA when he would get paid, Mumia has spent decades in prison - on Death Row for most of those years.

A small group of folks from Detroit will be heading to Philly to rally outside the courthouse and help bring attention and necessary pressure for Mumia to be freed. (Tell us if you're interested in going!) NOTHING happens in the courts in favor of Political Prisoners without pressure from the people. While Mumia has wonderful lawyers, they work parallel with the people's movement for Mumia. That movement forced the state to take Mumia off of Death Row after almost 30 years. The people kept him from being executed. Now, it's time to bring him home.

Stand with Mumia, his legal representatives and his supporters as Mumia has stood with us since the age of 14, as a leading figure in the Philadelphia Black Panther Party. His legal team will be in court petitioning to have the explosive new evidence heard and litigated in which the Common Pleas Court Judge Lucretia Clemons will be deciding if the new evidence warrants an impartial hearing, leading to a new trial or outright release:

- That new evidence being a key witness testifying against Mumia in the original 1981 trial, asking the former DA, Joseph Mc Gil "where is my money? I've been trying to contact you"
- Ineffective counsel and jury fixing to keep Blacks off of high-profile cases

The Campaign to Bring Mumia Home has a charter bus leaving NYC at 5:30 AM, headed to Philadelphia to stand against a fraudulent conviction and patently unfair trial fraught with over 21 Constitutional violations. Go to bringmumiahome.com to purchase your ticket, \$30 or call the Free Mumia Coalition hotline for more details 212.330.8029. We expect to be back in NYC by 4:00PM.

12 Oct - Animal Activists Sentenced To 30 Days In Jail

On the morning of October 12th, animal rights activists Amy Soranno and Nick Schafer were sentenced to 30 days in jail, 12 months of probation, and are required to provide their DNA to the DNA Data Bank.

MORE:

by Alex Binder (*Unicorn Riot*)

Soranno and Schafer were able to walk free out of the courthouse, however, because B.C. Supreme Court Justice Frits Verhoeven ruled that they won't be taken into custody until Oct. 21, 2022, when they will enter the Okanagan Corrections Centre. During the year-long probation, they will be prohibited from making contact with the Excelsior Hog Farm, its owners, or any animal farm.

In response to the sentencing decision, dozens of animal rights activists descended on Excelsior Hog Farm to demonstrate their opposition to the farm itself, and to the criminalization of Soranno and Schafer whose trial stems from a demonstration at the same farm in 2019. Meat The Victims went live on their Instagram account a couple times while outside the farm in Abbotsford.

Even with the sentence being shorter than the 90 days sought by the prosecution, the two activists plan to appeal. Soranno told *Unicorn Riot* before Wednesday's hearing that they plan to appeal no matter what. "The basis for our main defenses were cut out from under us and we, and the animals, were silenced repeatedly throughout this case."

She continued, "We need to right these wrongs, and we feel our grounds for appeal are strong."

Their legal counsel will also be filing an application for bail pending appeal. If the bail application is granted by the British Columbia Court of Appeal, Soranno and Schafer may have their sentence deferred until after the appeal is heard.

Aside from continuing their legal fight, they are unwavering in their efforts to push for mandatory CCTV cameras in all animal farms and slaughterhouses across the province, and for B.C.'s Ministry of Agriculture to change animal law enforcement from the BCSPCA to "a more accountable and effective agency."

"If you're proud of what you're doing, you're not doing anything wrong, you want activists to stop coming in, then let's have cameras inside there, so all of that can be dealt with." --Nick Schafer

When it comes to accountability and oversight, Schafer says there is none. "It's a self-regulated industry. These farmers are basically running on the honor code," Schafer told us.

"It's just absolutely ridiculous to me that an industry this massive, that an industry that it's sole purpose is to turn sentient living, feeling beings into products, to raise them and kill them, that there's no oversight as to how these animals are treated." --Nick Schafer

Soranno mentioned how 'Ag-Gag' laws have been passed in Alberta, Ontario, Manitoba, and Prince Edward Island, criminalizing those who film or report animal cruelty inside farms and slaughterhouses.

"These are massive industries with powerful ties to people in positions of power, including the legal system; therefore, these vested interests ensure the violent abuse and systemic cruelties toward farmed animals remain hidden, and that animal activists are criminalized." --Amy Soranno

This trial isn't the first time that B.C. Supreme Court Justice Frits Verhoeven sided with a powerful industry against activists. In April 2021, Justice Verhoeven granted an injunction against Fairy Creek Blockade protesters who blockaded logging roads for eight months to prevent logging company Teal-Jones from felling old-growth yellow cedars.

In his decision, Justice Verhoeven ruled that Teal-Jones would undoubtedly "suffer irreparable harm if the injunction [was] not granted."

In both the Fairy Creek Blockade case and the Excelsior Hog Farm case, activists were protesting to protect things that can't exactly speak up for themselves.

"While I cannot apologize for what I did, I would like to apologize to a specific female pig at Excelsior Hog Farm, who we have come to call "Her" rather than the abstract number tagged to her ear. She was found crammed in a metal cage, like the countless others next to her. But what stood out as different, was the dark blue and purple complexion of her skin. Upon closer examination, we realized she was covered in bruises, cuts and blood. In fact, she was laying in a pool of her own blood." --Amy Soranno

Soranno continued: "She needed help. I felt like, and still feel like, a monster—for seeing her, recognizing her unbelievable suffering, and leaving her behind. I wish more than anything that we could have rushed her to the vet and helped her, but we had no choice. Leaving the barn with her, surrounded by police, was simply not possible. To me, walking away is what felt criminal."

13 Oct - How COVID Relief Funds Went To Sniper Rifles and Police Bonuses

An inside look at how a Missouri city council reallocated millions in federal ARPA dollars to police.

MORE:

by Anastasia Valeeva (*The Marshall Project*)

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provides federal funding to local governments in amounts not seen in decades, giving them wide latitude to spend on police, corrections and courts. In Independence, Missouri, a city of 117,000 just outside of Kansas City, those spending decisions proved controversial, with the debate among local officials reaching a boiling point at the city council meeting on October 4, 2021.

Council members could not agree on amendments to the \$20.3 million spending plan proposed by the city manager.

Municipal budget meetings can be brief and perfunctory — this one was not. It ran twice as long as normal, as council members argued over proposed amendments to reallocate funds for police. “We have gotten behind in public safety,” said council member Mike Steinmeyer, who supported his colleague Brice Stewart’s proposal to reallocate money for police body cameras. “Let’s make it a priority. This is a redemptive moment for this council.”

Not everyone agreed. “Not a single council member has any business randomly shopping for the police department,” member Dan Hobart chastised his colleagues. “As far as good governance goes ... it’s not picking out whatever you want to do.” The amendment failed. Stewart, Steinmeyer and one more council member walked out of the room, forcing the meeting to adjourn early.

But it did not stop the city council from making purchases of \$2 million for the police department, including sniper rifles and ballistic helmets as well as bonuses for police officers. Despite the controversy, the council in Independence ultimately reallocated more ARPA money from the original plan to the police than to any other department or project.

Independence is hardly an outlier. Local governments across the country are allocating billions in ARPA funds for the criminal justice system. With little guidance and few rules imposed by the federal government, this spending reflects local priorities — and is often directed by a handful of local politicians and city staff.

Because almost any spending can qualify as “COVID relief,” local police agencies across the country are using ARPA funds to fill their needs, from shooting ranges to retention bonuses. Correctional institutions purchase body scanners, beef up surveillance systems and build new prisons. Courts hire additional staff and update infrastructure as a response to the pandemic-spurred case backlog.

Police benefited most from the reallocation of ARPA budget in Independence, Missouri

In Independence, local politicians reallocated money from a plan proposed by the city manager to law enforcement.

Not all proposed police spending in Independence was approved. The council voted down the gunshot detecting Shotspotter system recommended by the city manager and body cameras proposed by a council member, but approved other police equipment, and nearly tripled the payroll budget for hiring incentives and bonuses.

The biggest change the council made to the ARPA budget was to increase police bonus pay from \$600,000 to \$1.8 million. The City Council decided not only to provide a one-time hiring incentive for 30 new positions that were primarily funded with new sales taxes, but also to pay an \$8,000 retention bonus to each existing police officer. The city reports it currently has 203 police officers and 33 additional open positions. While ARPA funds were created to prevent cuts in the public sector, in Independence they are helping the city to exceed pre-pandemic police staffing levels. “The idea with those retention payments was to make it

compelling to stay and work for the Independence police department,” city manager Zach Walker told *The Marshall Project*.

The council also reallocated funds for new equipment purchases: ballistic helmets, riot gear, sniper rifles, detention unit cameras, a radio tower camera system and a police dog.

“After seeing the riots in other jurisdictions, it was apparent that we needed to update our equipment and training in this area,” states the police department chapter in the city budget for the 2022 fiscal year. “We haven’t had that here. But we did have it on our doorstep,” Police Chief Adam Dustman told *The Marshall Project*, referring to protests in nearby Kansas City, where Independence deploys officers as part of a mutual aid agreement. Demonstrations in Independence have remained peaceful. In 2020, hundreds of marchers held a moment of silence at the city courthouse.

Sniper rifles, ballistic helmets and all the other police spending was labeled “community violence intervention” in the city’s report to the U.S. Treasury. While the Treasury Department’s guidance did not clearly specify what could and could not be categorized as community violence intervention, the Bureau of Justice Assistance defines it as “an approach that uses evidence-informed strategies to reduce violence through tailored community-centered initiatives.”

With little oversight over how ARPA funds are spent, interpretation of this category is up to local authorities. Researchers have found that spending on traditional policing under the umbrella of community violence intervention is widespread in the program.

“It’s found money, right? So it’s not something you budget for, it’s not something you have to plan for,” said city council member Mike Steinmeyer. “The federal government says we’re gonna give you \$20 million dollars, and with that, you can do whatever you see fit.”

While the council fiercely debated over police and streetscaping spending, the Department of Health was mentioned once, in part because the Independence council had voted to eliminate the agency in 2017 in order to fund the police — in violation of their own city charter.

Looking back post-pandemic, Steinmeyer said it “was probably the stupidest thing we ever did.”

Initial ARPA funding included \$300,000 for the “costs associated with start-up of Health Department.” Then-city council member Karen DeLuccie advocated for an additional \$300,000. “This money is a gift from Washington based on the pandemic,” she said. “Our Health Department is needed.” Reluctantly, the council approved the amendment.

Just as in thousands of other local governments across the country, the way the Independence council decided to spend this “gift” money is essentially a reflection of their priorities.

“They ultimately decided to reallocate the bulk of the funds for these public safety purposes,” said city manager Zach Walker. “And it seems like they were in their minds trying to respond to the feedback that they felt they were getting from their constituents, who had indicated that an emphasis should be placed on public safety.”

Still, the extra funding for police did not feel like a victory for council members Steinmeyer and Stewart. “Law enforcement should be, if not the top, one of our top priorities,” Stewart told *The Marshall Project*. “If there was more money available, I would definitely try to go for that again.”