

Mentally ill Nampa woman stuck in cycle of jail, therapy

Katelyn Hodges is a beloved daughter and sister who loves to knit hats and hang out with the family bulldog, Ladybug.

She's a serial defendant, deemed a danger to herself and others, who's racked up dozens of charges and sometimes refers to her jailers as her "dads."

With multiple mental and developmental issues, Katelyn is viewed as a catalyst, a conundrum, an exemplar of how Idaho's system fails the mentally ill.

A new law, signed last month by Gov. Butch Otter, seeks to provide a more secure, more appropriate place to house people in her situation than jail or an unsecured treatment center. All involved agree it's a move in the right direction. But it's a short-term step — and big questions remain about how to help her and other Idahoans in extreme distress.

The cycle

At 26, Katelyn has an estimated mental age of 8 and a long list of diagnosed conditions.

"She has autism; that's her No. 1. She also has mental illnesses," said Katelyn's mother, Renee Williams, of Nampa. "She has schizoaffective bipolar disorder, which is like schizophrenia and bipolar together. She has post-traumatic stress disorder, she has multiple personality disorder.

"She has some ADD, and then she's developmentally delayed." And, Williams later noted, there's one other key diagnosis: "intermittent explosive disorder."

Katelyn started demonstrating explosive rage as a preschooler, and by her teen years was acting out in ways that got her arrested. Unable to control her or give her the help she needed, Williams eventually gave up guardianship of her now-adult daughter, and the state Department of Health and Welfare took over.

As a ward of the state, Katelyn was placed in numerous group homes and has been in and out of the Southwest Idaho Treatment Center (SWITC), the sprawling north Nampa campus formerly known as the Idaho State School and Hospital. SWITC is designed to take clients who can't be served by community-based centers or the private sector.

"She's in a facility, she's doing well, so they try to integrate her into the community," Williams said. "She's in the community, it doesn't work, she goes out, she commits a crime, she breaks windows, she assaults the staff, she goes back to jail. Then we're in the court system.

"We want there to be an end to this cycle."

Katie's Law

The newly minted legislation is the Secure Treatment Facility Act. But to Canyon County Sheriff Kieran Donahue and others who have grappled with Katelyn's crime-jail-court cycle, it's "Katie's Law."

Under privacy laws, state officials can't disclose the identity of the developmentally disabled, mentally ill SWITC resident they needed the new law to secure. But in testimony to legislative committees earlier this year, the description fit Katelyn to a T.

"We currently have a client who attacks female employees without warning by grabbing their hair by the scalp and then attempting to slam their head into her knee while shouting, 'I will kill you,'" testified Cameron Gilliland, who oversees SWITC as deputy administrator of the Division of Family and Community Services. He noted that other clients have posed dangers to staff and community in the past, but just one person currently raises that concern.

"This client was assigned to us by the courts after stays in the Canyon County Jail and Idaho Department of Correction, both of which have had difficulty handling her," he said.

Katelyn is the only person who matches that profile, Sheriff Donahue said.

Without the new law, SWITC's certification did not allow the Department of Health and Welfare to lock doors or keep sharp kitchen implements out of the hands of residents who have demonstrated they are dangerous, Gilliland said.

The agency plans to establish a four-bed secure wing at SWITC, which houses 28 people from across the state. Any new construction must wait for a future funding request; for now, Health and Welfare can use existing funds to install locks, cameras, alarms and other safeguards on one existing wing.

The only way to keep potentially destructive residents from walking away, Gilliland said, has been to "put staff in their way." And that has helped fuel crime in the community — he cited other problem incidents besides Katelyn's — high staff turnover and a stunning number of on-the-job injuries.

"Up to 30 to 40 percent of our staff files (injury) claims every year," he said. "Our turnover is 20 to 25 percent, double that of the rest of the department."

Force, fondness and frustration

Donahue, an outspoken advocate for the new law, calls it "a small step, a first step" to addressing the issues raised by his jail's most problematic recurring resident.

In just the 15 months from Aug. 29, 2015, to Nov. 22, 2016, Katelyn spent a combined 249 days in the Canyon County Jail, held a dozen times for violence against people and property.

Katelyn also spent nearly 11 weeks at the state Women's Correctional Center in Pocatello when the Idaho Department of Correction stepped in to help provide secure housing for her, bridging the gap between her last jail stay and her most recent transfer to SWITC, on Feb. 7.

At the jail, Katelyn has caused at least nine injuries to deputies, sometimes forcing them to take time off work, said jail Capt. Daren Ward. The worst incident put a deputy on disability for several months with a shoulder injury.

Generally, Ward said, Katelyn wasn't aggressively trying to hurt someone, but instead struggling against efforts to stop her from doing something.

"She's pretty large and pretty strong, and when they try to restrain her, they can get hurt," he said.

Katelyn, too, has been injured, her mother said: "I know at one time when we went in to see her (last May), she had 28 bruises on her."

Katelyn was often sedated or restrained to keep her under control in jail, Williams said. That worried her family.

At one point, she said, Katelyn was taken to a local hospital to be checked for a skull fracture, presumably from banging her head on a wall or floor.

Jail staff once put a helmet on Katelyn in an attempt to protect her from that self-destructive impulse, Donahue said. "She ripped the helmet apart with her bare hands."

The struggles were interspersed with moments of fondness.

"Some of (the deputies) were really nice to her," Williams said. "They sang songs to her. Some of them brought in personal coloring books and crayons from home to keep her occupied. They played a movie for her, the 'Frozen' movie ... they would sing 'Let It Go.' "

Jail deputies frequently strapped Katelyn into a restraint chair to calm her down, a measure Ward said she accepted willingly.

"Over one weekend, she could need the restraint chair 15 to 20 times," Ward said, "compared to an average of once a week for the other 400 inmates combined."

He winced a little as he described placing this childlike woman in criminal restraints. Such images help illustrate the sheriff's frustration.

"The county jail? That's not meant for a person who's dangerously mentally ill and found incompetent," Donahue said. "We're not equipped for this. I know our staff does everything possible, but we're not the right solution."

Ward smiled as he recalled notes that Katelyn wrote to him and others at the jail, including: "I have a lot of dads here. They take care of me."

Court conundrum

To her mother, it sometimes seems Katelyn has spent as much time in courtrooms as she has in jail cells.

“Literally, for the past year I have been in court a minimum of two times a month,” Williams said this spring. “For a while there we had a weekly court date.”

At one hearing in February, the session was cut short and rescheduled because Katelyn “threw herself on the table and then onto the floor, and it took four officers to restrain her,” Donahue said.

At a later hearing, she sat calmly at the defense table, secured by a belly chain, leg irons and three deputies standing behind her. She busied herself with notes and drawings, handing them to a deputy, who smiled.

Numerous criminal charges remain hanging over her head, and Donahue can’t understand why county prosecutors won’t drop them after a judge ruled last fall she was not competent to stand trial.

It’s not that simple, say Canyon County Prosecutor Bryan Taylor and Josh vanSwearingen, the deputy prosecutor who has handled Katelyn’s many cases. They say the only way to keep her secure may be to keep her charged with crimes.

But they agree with the sheriff on at least one thing: “Jail is not the right place for her,” Taylor said. “It’s a huge conundrum.”

At the heart of the matter is whether rehabilitation — Health and Welfare’s stated goal for SWITC clients — is possible for Katelyn.

“I would love to see her be able to live out in the community with help, but we’ve tried that over the past six years and it’s been unsuccessful,” Williams said.

The last time Katelyn was in a community setting, she was released to her mother’s home with aides hired to care for her while Williams was at work. That ended last September, after Katelyn twice walked to a nearby business and broke a total of five windows. In both cases, she called 911 to report her actions.

At a March hearing on 12 long-pending criminal cases against Katelyn, Canyon County Public Defender Tera Harden said her client is not able to adequately assist counsel, and she sees no sign that rehabilitation efforts could change that. She asked 3rd District Judge Bradley Ford to dismiss all 12; he later denied that request, but agreed to revisit Katelyn’s fitness to face trial.

VanSwearingen said he could be comfortable with dropping the charges if there were a more permanent option to keep Katelyn secure and the community safe. Prosecutor Taylor and others, including Williams, advocate for a long-term mental health treatment center in Idaho.

“Katie’s case, I think, highlights a lot of what’s going on in the system,” Taylor said. “To me it is a system-wide failure ... the way the system is structured. Mental health is a huge problem that we aren’t equipped to handle properly.”

But the newly passed Secure Treatment Facility Act does not offer that promise. And that is by design, Gilliland told the Statesman.

“There’s no mechanism to put somebody away for life, and I don’t think there should be,” he said. “We’re not a long-term center. We’re a treatment and stabilization center. ... It’s our experience that everyone progresses.”

Most people at SWITC, like Katelyn, are relatively young, and they tend to “mature out” of the behaviors that put them in that category, Gilliland said. The typical stay is about two years; he told lawmakers his agency is committed to keeping stays relatively short “to make sure it doesn’t turn into some state warehousing.”

Health and Welfare’s most recent assessment of Katelyn, reviewed in court on May 1, determined that she is not competent to stand trial but might become competent in the future. The agency requested, and received, a 180-day extension to her current commitment to SWITC.

And so the cycle continues.

“There are special situations that require special measures,” vanSwearingen said. “It’s never easy, it’s never cheap, and it can almost never seem fair.

“If someone finds the solution, I think everybody would be ‘yes, let’s go with that.’”

“Katelyn is a mental health patient who is stuck in the judicial system. The way Idaho is situated right now, it’s a revolving door in and out.”

— Canyon County Jail Capt. Daren Ward

“As soon as she starts talking about ‘when I get back out in the community,’ we just cringe as a family.”

— Renee Williams, Katelyn’s mother

Katelyn’s court cases

The 12 pending cases referenced in this report include 18 felonies and misdemeanors, evenly divided between assault/battery and malicious destruction of property. Katelyn also faces a separate felony charge, filed Feb. 7, of malicious injury to property involving multiple broken windows at Idaho Tool and Machinery last September. Online court records show that case as inactive.

In addition, online records show more than a dozen closed adult cases and a similar number of juvenile cases against Katelyn, most of which were ultimately dismissed. In three of the adult cases she was found guilty and sentenced to short stints in jail.

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What has changed under new law?

Since the governor signed the Secure Treatment Facility Act on April 4, locks and alarms have been installed in one unit at the Southwest Idaho Treatment Center. But none of its 28 residents are staying there, Cameron Gilliland of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare said last week.

“The clients are doing so well in the general population at SWITC that we’re not making it an emergency,” Gilliland said. “That could change any day. ... We’ve absolutely needed that in the past.”

The resident mentioned in March legislative testimony who fit Katelyn Hodges’ description won’t be moved into the unit until her behavior calls for it, Gilliland said. That resident, as of May 23, was living in a unit not shared by other clients.

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