

A young man’s death exposes holes in Oregon’s mental health system

Oregon State Hospital staff found Skye Baskin dead after his admission to the facility from Douglas County

BY BEN BOTKIN - MAY 30, 2024 - 4:03 PM



The Oregon Health Authority oversees the Oregon State Hospital in Salem. (Oregon Health Authority)

On March 1, Skye Baskin was in a crisis along a highway in Douglas County, wandering in and out of traffic.

The 27-year-old from Portland alarmed motorists, who swerved to avoid him. An Oregon State Police trooper responded and arrested Baskin for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, both misdemeanors.

That was Baskin’s last day of freedom before he died. He languished for six weeks in the Douglas County Jail and was unresponsive when his court-appointed defense attorney visited him in the facility, court records and interviews show. And he was unable to hold up his head when Douglas County deputies unloaded him from a van into a wheelchair as they dropped him off at Oregon State Hospital, the state’s secure psychiatric hospital in Salem.

Baskin lived in relative obscurity, bouncing around California, Washington and Portland as a young adult after he graduated from California City High School in 2015. Early in life, he and his brother, Trai Baskin, spent time in Georgia’s foster care system. His path from the edge of a highway in Douglas County to the Oregon State Hospital sheds light on a frayed system that policymakers struggle to fix even after putting more than \$1.3 billion toward new programs and facilities in 2021.



Skye Baskin (Provided)

Yet Baskin and others fall through the cracks.

“Why are they charging these cases?” asked Angelina Hollingsworth, the Douglas County public defender who represented him. “Why are the police picking up someone that’s clearly having a mental health issue, instead of using other resources in the community like the mobile crisis unit? They could have responded and worked this out.”

At this point, officials have not said when, exactly, Baskin died. Oregon State Hospital staff found he lacked a pulse after wheeling through the facility to his room.

Oregon State Police are investigating the death and its circumstances, as is procedural for all unattended deaths at Oregon State Hospital, an agency spokesperson said. The case is complex in part because it’s not clear when he died on that journey from the Douglas County Jail to Oregon State Hospital, a 134-mile drive that unfolded in a transport van.

Oregon State Hospital officials on Thursday released the results of a federal inspection after the death, a 150-page record that faults the hospital for failing to flag Baskin’s condition sooner.

Meanwhile, Baskin’s brother wonders what happened as he waits for answers.

Douglas County jail stay

An Oregon State Police sergeant spotted Baskin on March 1, as he walked across Interstate 5 and vehicles braked to avoid hitting him. He peered down into the Umpqua River from a bridge, the officer wrote in his report.

“Mr. Baskin seemed in a daze or fog of some sort and would not really communicate with me when I asked him if I could get him some help or find out what was going on,” the report said.

The officer held his wrist to keep Baskin from traffic and he started to pull away, the report said. The report said Baskin balled up his fist and the officer grabbed his wrists. Baskin resisted arrest and tried to pull away, and the officer used a foot sweep to trip him and tried to break his fall. A passerby pulled up and helped the trooper by jumping on Baskin’s back as he was handcuffed.

It’s unclear why he was free at that point instead of in a program. Just a day earlier, police in Sutherlin arrested Baskin for trespassing after receiving a complaint he was asking an employee at a Dutch Bros. coffee shop if he wanted to box, records show. He was taken to the Douglas County Jail and released without any charges filed.

This time was different. Baskin was booked in the Douglas County Jail and charged with two misdemeanors.

A few days later, Hollingsworth, his court-appointed attorney, went to the jail to visit him.

“Mr. Baskin did not make eye contact with me during the entire interaction,” Hollingsworth wrote in an affidavit obtained by the Capital Chronicle. “Mr. Baskin was rocking back and forth and did not acknowledge my presence or any of my questions.”

She said jail staff told her Baskin would not talk and hadn’t since he arrived. Because he didn’t talk and wandered aimlessly about, jail staff told her they decided to keep him in isolation, the affidavit said.

In court, Hollingsworth fought hard for her client. On April 1, she filed a motion for the charges to be dismissed, arguing that he had been in jail for 32 days already and no community programs were available to restore him to aid in his defense.

Instead, Circuit Court Judge Robert Johnson sent Baskin to Oregon State Hospital, which provides mental health treatment to people charged with crimes who are unable to aid in their defense. Under the state’s system, people can receive treatment and return to their community when they are well enough to face charges.

Baskin never got that treatment – or a trip back to Douglas County.

Arrival at the state hospital

Douglas County deputies drove Baskin to the Oregon State Hospital on April 18. When they opened the doors to the transport van, he was sitting in a slumped position, according to a federal report of violations the state hospital released Thursday. The document doesn’t identify him, but interviews and other records obtained by the Capital Chronicle connect him to the death in the report.

Deputies told a nurse they’d need a wheelchair because he “flops around like a fish,” the report said. The report faults nurses who took him to his room for failing to request a doctor to determine if his “unresponsive condition was behavioral, as law enforcement transporters claimed, versus medical,” saying a reasonable layperson would know to do this.

Aside from Baskin briefly opening his eyes, hospital staff saw little movement, the report said. His eyes were closed when they took an identifying photo, and they held his legs up with a blanket as they moved him to keep his feet off the floor. His head slouched to one side.

When he was placed in his bed, a nurse decided to check his pulse and found none. Efforts to resuscitate him failed and he was pronounced dead 69 minutes after arriving at the hospital.

The hospital reported his death to the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which blamed hospital staff for not checking Baskin’s condition, including vital signs like his pulse and temperature, upon his arrival.

Federal regulators also found disorganized medical emergency supplies, but don’t directly say those problems caused Baskin’s death in the report.

“Our number one priority at Oregon State Hospital is the safety and health of our patients and staff,” Dr. Sara Walker, OSH interim superintendent and chief medical officer, said in a statement.

The hospital plans to submit a plan outlining how it will improve its policies to CMS on Friday and has already started to make some changes, including more training and better organization of medical equipment.

In a memorandum to staff on Thursday, Walker said the hospital receives 25 to 30 new patients each week, and the new people often arrive with no recent medical care.

“While we are not responsible for patients before they come to OSH, we are responsible for all their treatment needs, both medical and psychiatric, as soon as they enter our admissions area,” Walker wrote. “You’ll see that called out in the CMS findings.”

The Douglas County Sheriff’s Office didn’t respond to requests for comment.

A brother remembers

Trai Baskin, a Marine Corps sergeant stationed in Japan, told the Capital Chronicle he’s waiting for answers from the government about his brother’s death.

“That just sounds crazy to me, but they aren’t really releasing any details to anyone,” he said in a phone interview.

The two spent years together in foster care in Georgia, growing up in different households, often under different circumstances, he said. But Baskin, 26, is just a year younger than his brother and they were close during their childhood.

“It has mostly just been me and Skye together,” he said.

They were adopted together when they were eight and nine and later went to live with an uncle when their adoptive father died, he said. In high school, they eventually lived in California.

His brother played the trumpet in middle school and high school, Baskin said. The two didn’t speak as often in adulthood but still kept in touch.

In January, they planned to play video games together. But through February and March, he was unable to connect with his brother and later found out he was in jail for much of that time.

“They’re just kind of playing hot potato with the blame here,” he said. “I doubt that’ll be quick, because it’s already been like a month or so.”