



Woman dies in jail while serving 2-day sentence for fines from children's truancy (video) (poll)

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A mother of seven, serving a two-day jail sentence because she had not paid fines in connection with her children's absences from school, was found dead Saturday in a Pennsylvania jail cell.

The death of Eileen DiNino, 55, of Reading, Pa., halfway through her sentence is drawing questions from state legislators and the judge who reluctantly sent her to jail, reports **WFMZ Channel 69**.

The Associated Press reports DiNino owed about \$2,000 in fines dating to 1999 and involved several of her seven children, most recently her sons at a vocational high school. Serving the sentence would have erased the debts.

District Judge Dean R. Patton sent DiNino to the Berks County jail Friday after she failed to pay the debt for four years.

But Patton described DiNino as "a lost soul," and questioned Pennsylvania laws that criminalize such lapses as truancy or failing to pay a trash bill, the AP reports:

"Did something happen? Was she scared to death?" Patton said. "This lady didn't need to be there. We don't do debtors prisons anymore. That went out 100 years ago."

Patton said under state law, his only option was to send her to jail. Dinino had a total of 55 violations against her for

her children missing numerous days of school in both Reading and Muhlenberg Township. Under state law, you can be sentenced to five days in jail for every violation, according to WFMZ.

Police do not believe DiNino's death is suspicious but a cause has not been determined, the AP reports. An autopsy was inconclusive and investigators are waiting for toxicology results.

Being sent to jail for two days for truancy fines has state legislators questioning the state's laws. From WFMZ:

"I cannot understand how someone ends up going to jail. They did not murder someone, they did not steal, they did not commit a felony. How does jail time equate to resolving this particular problem?" said State Sen. Judy Schwank, a Democrat.

The New York Daily News, citing reporting from the Reading, Pa., Eagle, says the majority of truancy cases deal with overwhelmed mothers:

"The people home taking care of the children are mothers," Richard Guida, an ex-truancy lawyer told the Eagle. "And some of these kids are no angels. They're teenagers and they're sullen. But then mom ends up in court." The prison warden referred all questions by the paper to Berks County Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt, who is also the chairman of the prison board. "This women died in prison - away from her family - and for what?" Barnhardt said. "What did she learn from this?"

Berks County Commissioner Christian Leinbach, a Republican, says he believes the current law is "insanity" and he wants to see it changed. From WFMZ:

"There has got to be a better way to deal with truancy than putting somebody in prison," Leinbach said. ... "I think there are better ways to deal with nonviolent crimes. I am not even sure quite frankly that things like truancy and parking should be criminal offenses and frankly support legislation that would decriminalize those offenses."

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