Inside the Deadly World of Private Prisoner Transport

Tens of thousands of people every year are packed into vans run by for-profit companies with almost no oversight.

By Eli Hager and Alysia Santo. Posted on Wednesday, July 6, 2016 at 5:00 a.m.

In July 2012, Steven Galack, the former owner of a home remodeling business, was living in Florida when he was arrested on an out-of-state warrant for failing to pay child support. Galack, 46, had come to the end of a long downward spiral, overcoming a painkiller addiction only to struggle with crippling anxiety. Now, he was to be driven more than a thousand miles to Butler County, Ohio, where his ex-wife and three children lived, to face a judge.

Like dozens of states and countless localities, Butler County outsources the long-distance transport of suspects and fugitives. Galack was loaded into a van run by Prisoner Transportation Services of America, the nation’s largest for-profit extradition company.

Crammed around him were 10 other people, both men and women, all handcuffed and shackled at the waist and ankles. They sat tightly packed on seats inside a cage, with no way to lie down to sleep. The air conditioning faltered amid 90-degree heat. Galack soon grew delusional, keeping everyone awake with a barrage of chatter and odd behavior. On the third day, the van stopped in Georgia, and one of two guards onboard gave a directive to the prisoners. “Only body shots,” one prisoner said she heard the guard say. The others began to stomp on Galack, two prisoners said.

The guards said later in depositions that they had first noticed Galack’s slumped, bloodied body more than 70 miles later, in Tennessee. A homicide investigation lasted less than a day, and the van continued on its journey. The cause of death was later found to be undetermined.

“This is someone’s brother, father, and it’s like nobody even cared,” said Galack’s ex-wife, Kristin Galack.

Every year, tens of thousands of fugitives and suspects — many of whom have not been convicted of a crime — are entrust to a handful of small private companies that specialize in state and local extraditions. A Marshall Project review of thousands of court documents, federal records and local news articles and interviews with more than 50 current or former guards and executives reveals a pattern of prisoner abuse and neglect in an industry that operates with almost no oversight.

Since 2012, at least four people, including Galack, have died on private extradition vans, all of them run by the Tennessee-based Prisoner Transportation Services. In one case, a Mississippi man complained of pain for a day and a
half before dying from an ulcer. In another, a Kentucky woman suffered a fatal withdrawal from anti-anxiety medication. And in another, guardsmocked a prisoner’s pain before he, too, died from a perforated ulcer.

Robert Downs, the chief operating officer of PTS, declined to comment on the deaths. He said guards were instructed to contact local officials when a serious medical emergency arises. “Unless it’s life or death, we can’t open the cage on the vehicle,” Downs said. “We don’t know if they’re setting us up for something.” This concern was echoed by guards at several companies, who said prisoners often feigned illnesses and injuries.

Training for guards, many of whom are military veterans, is often limited to a tutorial on handcuffs and pepper spray and a review of policies and paperwork, leaving them unprepared for the hazards of driving a van full of prisoners. At least 60 prisoners have escaped from private extradition vehicles since 2000, including one who later stabbed a police officer and another who was accused of sexual assault on a minor and is still missing.

The companies are usually paid per prisoner per mile, giving them incentive to pack the vans and take as few breaks as possible. Crashes have killed a dozen prisoners and guards.

Operating primarily across the South and Midwest, guards travel up to weeks at a time along circuitous routes, typically picking up and dropping off prisoners in 15-passenger vans or sometimes minivans retrofitted with interior caging and darkened windows.

These vans do not have prisoner beds, toilets or medical services. Violent felons are mixed with first-time suspects. A plexiglass divider is usually the only thing separating women from men.

At least 14 women have alleged in criminal or civil court since 2000 that they were sexually assaulted by guards while being transported by these companies.

“Just stay in jail. It’s better,” said Lauren Sierra, 21, who said she was repeatedly sexually assaulted by a guard in 2014 while being transported by U.S. Corrections, a rapidly growing company registered in North Carolina.

Sierra, who is suing the company, was taken into custody after she faced charges, later dropped, that she used someone else’s Bed, Bath & Beyond gift card. Dustin Baldwin, the executive director of U.S. Corrections, declined to comment beyond saying that the accusations had not been proved.

Because the vans cross state lines, accountability falls into a gray zone. Jurisdictions that hire the companies often disavow responsibility for prisoners not under their direct custody, and federal regulators have largely ignored the industry.

“It’s like the airport shuttle from hell,” said Zachary Raines, a former PTS guard.

Strained Jails and Budgets

At a time when a swollen United States prison and jail population has strained law enforcement budgets, transport companies often offer a significantly cheaper alternative to traditional extradition, in which local deputies are sent miles out of state for one person.

“Some agencies take huge advantage of the taxpayers’ money by sending deputies ‘on vacation’ to extradite an inmate,” said Baldwin of U.S. Corrections, and pay them “a considerable amount of overtime” for doing so. They also have to cover fuel costs or plane tickets and, often, hotel rooms.
Private vans can save considerably by picking up and dropping off other prisoners along the way, charging 75 cents to $1.50 a mile per prisoner.

Corrections departments in 26 states, law enforcement in cities such as Chicago, Atlanta and Las Vegas, and local agencies nationwide use extradition companies. Although about two dozen private prisoner transport companies have registered with the Department of Transportation, only seven have state-level extradition contracts, with PTS having the most by far.

But maintaining tight profit margins depends on relentlessly shaving time and costs on the road, industry veterans said.

“You route the prisoner like a package, but miss a single deadline, and you lose money,” said Kent Bradford, a former director of operations for TransCor America, a subsidiary of Corrections Corporation of America, the largest private prison company in the United States. TransCor stopped performing extraditions in 2008 because of liability and cost concerns, but still moves prisoners between CCA locations.

Guards — who earn about $150 to $250 per 24-hour shift, and who rotate driving duty — are generally paid only while they are on the road. Because they often have to pay out-of-pocket for a hotel room, most said they rarely chose to stop.

Bunking overnight also requires finding a jail willing to offer beds and showers to prisoners, which is difficult because jails do not always want to house unknown prisoners from other jurisdictions.

“Td have an exhaust fan installed in the hall to get that smell out,” said David Osborne, who runs the Daviess County Detention Center in Kentucky, which used to be a PTS hub for transferring and housing prisoners en route.

**Shackled and caged**

A 360-degree view from inside a decommissioned PTS van shows the conditions under which prisoners have been transported across long distances. Behind the driver’s seat, vans have a section for women and a segregation cage (bottom) to hold unruly prisoners. Steven Galack was held in segregation for part of his trip. Click and drag to explore the interiors.

To keep up with demand, vans drive across as many as a dozen states on a single trip. “The bosses would be on the phone, saying, What, you can’t do it? You can’t push it, you can’t make it to the next jail?” said Fernando Colon, who worked as a guard for two years, first for a company that is now defunct and then for U.S. Corrections.

On most trips, every meal for days is a fast-food sandwich. Water is rationed and bathroom stops limited. Prisoners who cannot wait often urinate in bottles or on themselves, and sometimes defecate on the floor of the van, according to guards and lawsuits.

“People were screaming, complaining, passing out. I threw up,” said Roberta Blake, 37, who spent two weeks in 2014 being transported by PTS from California to Alabama, including a week in a stifling van.
Medical Skills Not Required

For some prisoners, the ride ends in serious injury, or even death.

Michael Dykes, who has diabetes, had both of his legs amputated after three days in an Inmate Services Corporation van in July 2012. Dykes said he had already been in declining health when he got into the van after spending nearly three weeks in a South Carolina jail with poor medical care. But once in transport to Missouri, his condition worsened, he said.

Black sores on his toes were exacerbated by pressure from ankle shackles, a lawsuit alleges, and his repeated requests for medical care were ignored. His insulin, which must be kept cold, was stored on the dashboard in the sun, Dykes said.

Randy Cagle Jr., the president of the Arkansas-based Inmate Services Corporation, denied the accusations. “We always follow protocol and get medical information when we pick an inmate up,” he wrote in an email. “I am confident that we will be vindicated.”

Cagle said in a brief phone interview that some prisoners lied or sued frivolously. “You are not going to get through this business without hurting people’s feelings,” he said. “You just have to remember to treat people fair.”

When suspects are arrested on a warrant, they often spend considerable time in a local jail before being picked up for extradition. About a dozen guards from several transport companies said jails provided substandard medical care and little information about prisoners’ health status or prescribed medications, which the guards are expected to dispense en route. Guards are not required by law to have any medical experience other than training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

“They did an hourlong class on their policies, taught us to put on handcuffs, gave us our uniforms and put us on the road. And then we’re expected to deal with this stuff,” said Kenneth Adams, one of two guards aboard a PTS van in which Denise Isaacs, 54, died in Miami in 2014.

Like Galack, Isaacs began experiencing bizarre symptoms while on board: muttering, drooling and gasping. When she was unable to climb back into the van after a stop, the guards phoned PTS headquarters. But their supervisors said to keep going, Adams told investigators with the Miami-Dade Police Department.

“I would have taken her to the hospital,” the other guard, Kirk Westbrooks, said in an interview with The Marshall Project. “I wanted to.”

Isaacs, who had been arrested on charges of violating probation on a theft conviction, died a few hours later in a Taco Bell parking lot. An autopsy later found that she had been experiencing delirium tremens caused by withdrawal from diazepam, an anti-anxiety medication that PTS staff members said they were never informed she was taking.
In January of this year, PTS guards transporting William Culpepper Jr., 36, from Kentucky to Mississippi told officials at a stop at a company jail hub in Missouri that they believed he was faking stomach pains, according to a sheriff’s report. Culpepper, who was wanted for a parole violation, died minutes later from what the coroner handling his case called a "perfectly treatable" perforated ulcer.

It was the second time in two years that a PTS prisoner had died from a perforated ulcer. In 2014, William Weintraub, 47, a former physics professor charged with threatening a South Carolina newspaper over an article he disputed, was found blue and covered in urine in the back of a PTS van when it reached Georgia.

Investigators there determined that PTS guards had mocked Weintraub’s complaints of severe stomach pain. The investigation was closed.

Attempts at Reform

Kyle Bell was no ordinary prisoner.

In 1993, he molested and murdered his 11-year-old North Dakota neighbor, Jeanna North. Six years later, he escaped from a private transport van. His absence was not noticed for nine hours, and guards did not notify the police for another two hours. The escape warranted a segment on “America’s Most Wanted.”

After the episode, Byron Dorgan, then a Democratic United States senator from North Dakota, introduced a measure to impose controls on the industry. “My colleagues and I were all shocked that a guy and his wife with an S.U.V. could start a business to haul violent offenders around with no requirements,” Dorgan said. The law, commonly known as Jeanna’s Act, passed in 2000.

Jeanna’s Act mandates that extradition companies must notify local law enforcement immediately after an escape, dress violent prisoners in brightly colored clothing and maintain a ratio of one guard for every six prisoners. It also sets broad standards for training and background checks of guards, and for treatment of prisoners.

But the federal law is almost never enforced. The Justice Department could identify just one instance: In 2011, a suspect accused of child molestation escaped from an unlocked van in North Dakota, a few hours from where Jeanna had been murdered. Local farmers cleared a cornfield to flush him out. The company, Extradition Transport of America, was fined $80,000 and went out of business.

“Well, it’s regulated by the Department of Justice, but I’ve never seen anybody come out to actually check on us,” said Downs, the chief operating officer of PTS. “We’re just supposed to follow the guidelines.”

Outsourcing extraditions

| States where corrections department uses for-profit extradition company |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| WA                     | ID                      | MT                      | ND                      | MN                      | WI                      | MI                      | VT                      | NH                      | MA                      |
Extradition companies are not required to report escapes to federal regulators, and there is no centralized tracking. But a review of dozens of local news accounts shows that since Jeanna’s Act was passed, at least 56 prisoners were reported to have escaped from for-profit extradition vehicles. At least 16 were reported to have committed new crimes while on the run.

By comparison, the prison systems of California, Florida and Texas — which together transport more than 800,000 inmates every year, most of them in-state — have each had just one prisoner escape from transport vehicles over the same period.

“We thought we’d closed the door on this,” Dorgan said in reference to the widespread use of small extradition companies and the escapes that have occurred.

While the Department of Transportation has no role in responding to escapes or prisoner mistreatment, it is responsible for monitoring vehicle and driver safety, including whether guards get enough downtime away from the wheel, under the same regulations that govern all passenger carriers.

A Marshall Project review of Department of Transportation records shows that the agency’s monitoring is infrequent, and companies are typically given advance notice of an audit. Between 2000 and 2015, records indicate, the department issued fines 20 times, most below $10,000. While PTS has been registered with the department since at least 2005, the agency did not audit the company until 2009, records show. U.S. Corrections, which was founded in 2014, was audited for the first time in March.

Because passenger carriers are not required to specify to the Transportation Department what kinds of people they move around, a department spokesman said he could not comment on specifics about the prisoner transport industry.

Local news reports and court records show that there have been more than 50 crashes involving private extradition vehicles since 2000. In almost every instance, the prisoners were shackled but not wearing seatbelts, leaving them unable to brace themselves.

In addition to the dozen deaths, a dozen prisoners have suffered injuries to their necks, skulls or spines, according to lawsuits, hospital reports and accident reports obtained from state and local agencies.

Fatigue seems to have played a role in many of the accidents. Of 26 accidents for which a time could be determined, 14 occurred between midnight and 6 a.m.

Downs, who took over operations at PTS after it merged last year with one of its biggest competitors, the Florida-based U.S. Prisoner Transport, said he had taken steps to make the company safer. The company had already installed sleeper berths for guards in its vans.

Downs said its agents were now required to stay in a company-paid hotel room every 36 hours, although he said that was not always possible because of scheduling pressures. The company also has three full-size buses and has bought four larger shuttle buses, all with bathrooms on board, in addition to its fleet of nearly 30 vans. Guards are monitored by GPS, and their pay has been increased, Downs said.

"It’s a tough industry," he said. "The profit margins aren’t as good as you would think they are." He declined to answer a list of written questions about specific occurrences in the company’s vans.

Security Transport Services, which is based in Topeka, Kan., and has been in the business since 1990, says it puts all prisoners in seatbelts and requires agents to stay in a hotel every night. A Kansas sheriff said the company had also partly reimbursed his department for the cost of a manhunt after a 2012 escape, which is required by law in cases of negligence but rarely happens, according to a survey of law enforcement officials in jurisdictions where escapes occurred.

But the company charges about 30 percent more than its competitors, said Tom Bork, its vice president. Security
IN 2009, A PTS GUARD WAS BELIEVED TO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL AT 1:24 A.M. IN GREENE COUNTY, GA., KILLING TWO GUARDS AND A PRISONER. THE PRISONERS WERE NOT WEARING SEATBELTS. GREENE COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE

Transport Services has contracts with three state corrections departments, compared with nearly 20 held by PTS, and it recently lost its Pennsylvania contract to U.S. Corrections. PTS says in federal filings that it has "contracts or relationships" with about 800 agencies. It is also poised to acquire U.S. Corrections, one of its main competitors, next month, according to a filing with the national Surface Transportation Board.

Answers Are Elusive

After Galack’s death, his brother, Robert, made repeated calls to the Tennessee authorities, trying to determine what had happened. “I mean, he was fully in shackles and ended up dead?” he said.

It was hard to find answers. Only one prisoner in the van, Chelsie Hoggett, told investigators that Galack had been beaten. Another, Joseph Allen, did not confirm the account until a later civil suit.

The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation decided within eight hours of arriving at the scene that if a crime had occurred, it had happened in Georgia. It sent the van on its way. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation declined to follow up, records show.

A Deadly Ride

Steven Galack was picked up in Florida by a private firm in 2012 for delivery to a hearing in Ohio. He died three days into the journey after allegedly being attacked by other prisoners in the transport van. His death came in the middle of a six-state itinerary shared by two drivers. Their logs list stops in these 41 cities and towns: the exact routes are not known.
1. Galack is picked up at the Palm Beach County Jail on the morning of July 30, 2012. Two other prisoners picked up shortly after him say he is acting normally.

2. But overnight, as the van travels north, Galack keeps the other prisoners awake, calling out for medicine and complaining of pain.

3. Increasingly delusional, Galack keeps the other prisoners awake for a second night.

4. Between Athens and Dalton, Ga., the driver pulls over and allegedly encourages the other prisoners to beat Galack.

5. Galack is found dead in Madisonville, Tenn.

The medical examiner noted Galack’s injuries — a broken rib, bruises on his head, torso, arms and legs, a broken tooth and cuts around his nose and eyes — but did not believe they had led to his death.

The investigation was determined to be “as thorough as the circumstances warranted,” said Josh DeVine, a spokesman for the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

Anthony Dwyer, the chief deputy of the sheriff’s office in Butler County, Ohio, said he had been told only that a prisoner had died en route, not that a beating might have been involved. “It wasn’t really our responsibility,” he said. He said he monitored PTS’s performance by speaking to prisoners when they arrive.

Darnell Ball, one of the guards in the van that transported Galack, declined to comment, citing a confidentiality agreement. The other, Leroy Creese, did not respond to two attempts to contact him at an address believed to be his home. A PTS official said in a deposition taken in a civil lawsuit that Galack had sustained the injuries in a fall in the van.

This spring, Galack’s family won a confidential settlement against PTS. But Galack’s son, Jordan, found it paltry consolation. Now 20, he had talked to his father every day on the phone and lost 30 pounds after his father’s death.

Kristin Galack said she had never had any idea what her ex-husband would face when he was arrested. “Steve and the other people on these vans, they’ve made mistakes,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean he couldn’t come back from it. People do.”

Three months after Galack was found in the back of the van, PTS sent Butler County a bill for $1,061 — the cost of the 752 miles he was transported before dying.