

Man Sentenced To Seven Years In Pen.

WATERTOWN (AP) — A Watertown man who pleaded guilty to manslaughter and aggravated assault in the death of a man following a fight in a parking lot behind a bar was sentenced to seven years in prison.

KWAT radio reports that 29-year-old Jerrin Stulken was sentenced Wednesday after pleading guilty to second-degree manslaughter and aggravated assault for the death of 26-year-old Justin Jatou of Watertown.

Stulken was also ordered to pay \$8,600 in restitution to the Jatou family. He had faced up to 25 years in prison.

Authorities say the fight happened March 13, and Jatou died 18 days later in a Sioux Falls hospital.

Central Neb. May Get New Reservoirs

HOLDREGE, Neb. (AP) — Central Nebraska may soon be home to some new reservoirs.

The Kearney Hub says the board of the directors of Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District is considering one or more regulating reservoirs. The district's staff will work with the Platte Recovery Implementation Program and the state on an agreement.

The Platte Recovery program, which works to benefit threatened and endangered species along the Platte River, says the reservoirs would be used to reduce target flow shortages.

According to its website, the power district delivers water to irrigation projects along the North Platte and Platte rivers and generates electricity at four hydroplants.

Event Center Group Raises \$10 K So Far

SIoux FALLS (AP) — A group campaigning to build an events center in Sioux Falls raised \$10,700 in cash in its first month.

The Argus Leader reports that campaign finance records filed with the city also show local businesses donated \$42,500 in goods or services to the Build it Now campaign.

The money could be the beginning of a \$115 million project to build a 12,000-seat facility to be used for sporting events, concerts and as extra floor space for the Sioux Falls Convention Center.

Neb. Audit Blasts Child Welfare Services

BY GRANT SCHULTE
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Nebraska's effort to privatize child welfare services increased costs by 27 percent in a two-year period and led to millions of dollars in overpayments to a provider that has since gone out of business, according to a state audit released Wednesday.

Nebraska State Auditor Mike Foley told a legislative panel that the Department of Health and Human Services failed to publicly bid multi-million dollar contracts with private service providers, and spent thousands of dollars on duplicate claims and payments to the wrong contractors.

The audit was part of a legislative review of the rising costs and instability within Nebraska's child welfare system. The state began to privatize services in 2009, handing cases of neglected and abused children over to contractors. Three of the five providers have since dropped or lost their contracts as caseloads and costs grew unsustainable.

Foley told the Legislature's Health and Human Services committee that department officials have not turned over documents his auditors requested, in possible violation of state law. He said the department's lack of cooperation with the audit ranks "among the worst ever encountered in my office."

Committee members vented frustration with the agency for what several described as a lack of clear answers about costs and care services for vulnerable children. State workers have returned to child care duties in parts of the

state where contracts have ended, and lawmakers are trying to decide how to proceed. Critics of privatization have suggested a return to the old system.

"The longer I sit here, the more my blood is beginning to boil," said Lincoln Sen. Amanda McGill. "In terms of going back or going forward — based on what we heard this morning, I don't know if I trust putting it all back in HHS."

The audit alleged that the department failed to take possession of important and potentially confidential documents relating to client services after it terminated contracts with a service provider. Service providers failed to meet client service coordination and delivery benchmarks required in their contracts, according to the audit.

Kerry Winterer, the department's CEO, says agency officials "strongly and fundamentally disagree" with the audit findings. He disputed claims that the service provider was overpaid, and says the agency cooperated with auditors.

Winterer said management decisions questioned in the audit were made to protect the integrity of the child welfare and juveniles services system.

Todd Reckling, director of the department's Division of Children and Family Services, said the agency agrees with some of the findings and has already increased its oversight of lead contractors and financial issues. In June, the agency named Families Matter administrator in the agency's two service areas with lead contractors to provide full-time oversight.

Winterer said the department

has legal authority to award contracts without competitive bidding for child welfare service provided to individuals. Even so, he said, the department chose to issue a request for qualifications for the contracts, allowing all interested bidders to compete publicly.

He said the service provider in the report, Visinet, was not over-

paid because the department has the authority to settle contract disputes. The amounts paid to the company and its employees, foster families and subcontractors were allowed under its contract, he said.

Winterer said the department could have been more effective in its response to the audit, and has since made changes. But he said

the department acted in good faith responding to the state auditors.

Critics of privatization pointed to the audit as the latest sign that the reforms have failed. But several advocates and lawmakers said it may be too late to resume the old system, because the state has a severe caseworker shortages and growing case loads.

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