

Long Story Short: State prison staff face criminal charges, litigation for plotting prisoner's assault

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Oklahoma Watch: Long Story Short

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David Coker stepped off an inmate transport bus at the Lexington Assessment and Reception Center expecting to be interviewed, photographed and fingerprinted.

The then 42-year-old, sentenced to 15 years for first-degree rape in Oklahoma County, started the state's booking process for county jail transfers without issue. Prisoners chatted and joked in a holding cell to pass the time as they awaited a medical assessment around noon on Feb. 10, 2023.

"I had the assumption that this was pretty much it," Coker said during a May 23 phone interview.

But the mundane affair turned violent when a correctional officer alleged Coker had sexually assaulted his niece several times.

The officer told prisoners in holding cell No. 3 that he wished he could assault Coker and directed the inmates to "handle it," according to an **internal Department of Corrections investigation**. When the officer turned his back, several prisoners began striking Coker with their hands, fists and feet.

As Coker sat injured on a bench outside the cell, the officer returned to thank the inmates who attacked him, according to a prisoner who spoke with Inspector General Agent Michael Williams. Staff did not evaluate Coker's condition or take him to the prison's medical unit.

Still without a cell assignment several hours later, Coker was assaulted by another group of prisoners. The officer assigned to the unit was slow to respond to the assault and notify medical staff, the internal investigation said.

The doctor on duty noted severe bruising on Coker's head and upper body and recommended staff take him to the Purcell Municipal Hospital for further evaluation. A CT scan came back negative for bleeding in the brain and prison staff drove Coker back to the facility just after midnight on Feb. 11, 2023.

Williams' investigation concluded that four correctional officers violated state law by encouraging prisoners to assault Coker. The Cleveland County District Attorney's Office charged Matthew Sinnett, Eric Cramer, Cody Cross and Sean Skarecky with misdemeanor conspiracy to commit assault in June 2023 but opted not to file negligence of duty charges.

The investigation recommended misdemeanor assault charges for two prisoners, but prosecutors opted not to file them. The involved inmates also did not receive internal disciplinary action.

Sinnett pleaded no contest in April and received a 45-day suspended sentence, a \$100 fine and 10 hours of community service. Cramer pleaded no contest and on June 3 received one year of probation with adjudication deferred to June 2, 2025.

Cross and Skarecky's cases are pending.

Sinnett and Cramer's employment was terminated in June 2023, while Cross received a 10-day suspension, corrections department spokesperson Kay Thompson said. Corrections officials did not discipline Skarecky.

Coker said he wishes the officers would have been charged with felonies based on the severity of his injuries. He said he has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, nightmares and depression since the assault.

"The part that I replay in my mind is when you arrive at LARC, there's a sign that says protect the public and protect the inmates," Coker said. "I can't help but think if that's your job, why are you doing this?"

The involved officers also face a pair of lawsuits alleging they failed to perform the minimum duties required of a state officer.

On Feb. 9, Oklahoma City attorney Shelby Shelton **filed a negligence lawsuit** against the four officers and the Department of Corrections in Cleveland County District Court. The petition claims the assault significantly lowered Coker's quality of life and seeks damages of more than \$75,000. A hearing on the matter is pending.

"The defendants owed a duty of care to the plaintiff to protect him from the infliction of a physical assault and battery, and that Officers Sinnett, Cramer, Skarecky and Sinnett would be adequately trained, supervised and controlled when dealing with the public," the lawsuit reads. "Defendants have breached their duty to the plaintiff."

Coker filed a similar lawsuit in federal court in February claiming his civil rights were violated. U.S. Magistrate Judge Suzanne Mitchell **ruled on May 14** that Lexington prison staff have 90 days to produce a series of records responsive to the claims.

Caleb Coker, David Coker's 19-year-old son, said he said he was surprised to learn of the attack and assumed staff would distance themselves if they had a personal connection to an inmate.

"There definitely hasn't been enough accountability," Caleb Coker said. "If anyone out here assaulted someone like that, you would end up at the same place they're all at."

Emily Barnes, founder of the Oklahoma prisoner advocacy organization Hooked on Justice, said there's a widespread stigma among prisoners and staff regarding sex offenders. But regardless of personal feelings, Barnes said staff are obligated to maintain a high level of professionalism.

"A good correctional officer would have gone to their superior and said they can't be on this unit, they have to be recused," Barnes said. "Since he worked at the reception center he knew that he was coming there. That's a given. He planned that."

Editor's Note: This story was updated on Wednesday, June 5 to clarify the status of criminal charges against the four officers.

Oklahoma Watch, at oklahomawatch.org, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that covers public-policy issues facing the state.