



U.S. NEWS

A federal prisoner was shot dead in Florida in rare gunfire behind bars

The family of Dwayne “DJ” Tottleben, an inmate at the [Coleman prison complex](#), is demanding answers after learning he was killed. Guns are not typically permitted in prisons.



— Dwayne Tottleben. GoFundMe

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By Erik Ortiz and Jon Schuppe

An Illinois man was shot dead while incarcerated in a federal prison in Florida this month, his family and officials told NBC News, a rare incident behind bars as guards largely are not allowed to carry firearms.

Loved ones of inmate Dwayne Tottleben say they haven't received answers from the federal Bureau of Prisons about how or why he was shot, more than a week after his death Oct. 10 at U.S. Penitentiary Coleman I, a high-security men's prison northwest of Orlando.

The [BOP typically shares information](#) on inmate deaths in custody, but there was no immediate release about Tottleben. Agency officials did not respond to requests for comment amid the ongoing [federal government shutdown](#). The local medical examiner's office in Florida confirmed Tottleben's fatal shooting to NBC News.

Donna Ford, a longtime friend who said she's listed as next of kin for Tottleben, said the prison called her around 9 p.m. Oct. 10 to tell her he had died. She said the official offered no other details.

It came as a shock, she said, because she had spoken to Tottleben, who went by DJ, just that morning for about 15 minutes. Tottleben, 33, had been serving 15 years for possession of methamphetamines with intent to distribute related to an August 2020 traffic stop in St. Louis.

"He was in a good mood. He told me he loved me. He told me to 'send pictures of the kids, give the kids hugs for me,'" Ford said of her children. "He said, 'I miss you. I love you.' There was no agitation."





— The entrance to Coleman federal prison in Florida in 2008.

Ryan K. Morris / Bloomberg via Getty Images file

Tottleben's father, also named Dwayne, learned of his death from Ford the following morning and spoke with the medical examiner's office for Sumter County. He said he was in tears as he begged for information about his son's death.

"I was distraught. I didn't know if somebody stabbed him. I didn't know anything," the senior Tottleben said.

He said the office told him that his son was shot, but that still left him with questions.

"I'm trying to wrap my mind around how something like this could happen," he said.

A prison spokesperson did not directly respond when asked about a deadly shooting at USP Coleman I or an investigation into Tottleben's death. The prison's website says visitation "has been suspended until further notice."

In response to NBC News' questions, the prison sent an emailed statement saying that the facility was placed on "enhanced modified operations" Oct. 10, and that "wardens may establish controls or implement temporary security measures to ensure the good order and security of their institution, as well as ensure the safety of the employees and the individuals in our custody."

"In securing a facility, it is always the hope this security measure will be short-lived, and the facility returned to normal operations as quickly as possible," the statement added.

While there is a [lack of reliable data](#) regarding deaths in prisons and jails, fatal shootings are uncommon because guns are not routinely used to secure the facilities, said Steve J. Martin, a corrections expert who has worked for the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and on use-of-force cases involving prisons.

Prison employees can only carry firearms while doing certain tasks, including transporting inmates, preventing escapes and guarding security posts, BOP [policy states](#). Wardens must approve any employees who carry guns.

"If you have weaponry inside, there's always the possibility that it can get in the hands of an inmate, which is the last thing you want," Martin said. "Besides, there is so much other nonlethal weaponry that can be used."

BOP policy says that force against inmates should be a "last alternative," and that deadly force may be used when there's a "reasonable belief that the inmate poses an imminent danger of death or serious physical injury" to others.

If the use of a firearm is "deemed necessary," the employee "must shoot the subject with every intention of hitting 'center mass' to ensure the subject is stopped," the policy states. "Employees will not attempt to shoot a limb which creates a lesser chance of stopping the subject and may pose a danger to employees, other inmates, or persons in the community."

Joe Rojas, a retired BOP officer and past union president at Coleman, said less lethal options may include stun grenades and pepper spray, as well as the firing of warning shots ahead of deadly force.

Gunfire is rare at Coleman. Rojas said a fight among inmates more than 15 years ago led to staff members firing shots in the recreation yard. One inmate suffered a gunshot wound and several others were injured when prison officials said they ignored commands, [according to reports](#) at the time.

The circumstances surrounding Tottleben's death have baffled his loved ones. Even if his son was violent before his death, the escalation to gunfire is troubling, Dwayne Tottleben said.

"When people get into fights in prison, they lose 'good time' credit," he said. "They don't lose their life."

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Tottleben had a tumultuous upbringing, according to friends who wrote letters to the judge asking for leniency last year in his federal sentence.

Ford wrote that Tottleben's father had done time in prison during his childhood.

"I feel like he did not really have a chance to learn to be on the right side of the law," Ford wrote.

A grade-school friend of Tottleben's who previously suffered from drug addiction told the judge, "I have watched him struggle right along with me for most of our lives."

Tottleben was also deeply affected by a police shooting in October 2020, his family said.

An Illinois State Police officer struck Tottleben in the back after he was hiding in a car and attempted to surrender, according to a civil rights lawsuit in which he sought \$2 million for pain and suffering.

The officers said they believed he was armed, but Tottleben's lawyer, Jason Marx, said only a flashlight was recovered from the car. By late 2023, the suit was settled; the terms were not disclosed.

As that litigation unfolded, a federal grand jury indicted Tottleben on the methamphetamine charge in February 2021, but for reasons that are not clear in court records, he was not arrested until May 2023. Separately, he had been serving time in an Illinois prison for burglary.

Tottleben said he had "substance abuse and mental health issues" and described those, along with a brain tumor, as causes of his criminal behavior, a federal judge noted in a November 2023 court filing. He said that he'd had that tumor removed and stopped using drugs.

In June 2023, a month after his arrest, Tottleben's mother died from a drug overdose, Ford said.

“He’s had hard times, but when I talked to him that morning, he was completely fine,” Ford said of their last conversation Oct. 10. “He did not say that he felt like he was in danger.”

Tottleben’s family members have started a GoFundMe to pay for legal support as they “navigate understanding the situation that caused his death.”

Robert J. Slama, an attorney representing Tottleben’s family, said he will seek an independent medical examination of his body as they call for “full disclosure and accountability” from the prison.



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