

FORT WORTH

Women are sent to Carswell federal prison for dialysis. They say it's killing them.

By **Kaley Johnson** *The Marshall Project*
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Gift Article



A photo of Martha Perez is found in a bin of family photos at her family's home in Prescott Valley, Arizona, on Sunday, March 9, 2025. *Courtney Pedroza for the Marshall Project*

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Evangelina Perez lost count of the number of times her mother, Martha Perez, called her from federal prison, gasping for breath because she had missed dialysis treatments for her kidney failure.

At 59, Martha Perez also had diabetes and congestive heart failure. She had been in various federal prisons since 2005 on money laundering and drug convictions. In 2018, the Bureau

of Prisons sent her to the Federal Medical Center Carswell in Fort Worth, the country's only federal medical prison for women.

The bureau houses some of the sickest women at Carswell, and it's the only federal women's prison with in-patient dialysis — a critical, life-sustaining treatment for people with kidney failure.

But in court documents she filed pleading for release, Perez described her worsening health and her fear of dying at Carswell. In May 2022, another incarcerated person had to help her write a final request because of her poor vision. Just over a year later, Perez died in a Fort Worth hospital. No family was with her.

"I understand the circumstances, but initially, like there is a care that they should have been providing," Evangelina Perez said. "It got to the point where she started retaining fluid on her chest, and she ended up passing away from a heart attack."

Perez had serious illnesses that required consistent care. But Carswell does not adequately provide the dialysis care that the Bureau of Prisons claims it does, according to lawyers, medical experts and former bureau officials, along with court and medical records. Women at Carswell describe missed treatments, poor education for patients, dialysis machines that break down mid-treatment or that lacked enough clean water, and other routine problems.



Evangelina Perez poses while holding a photo of her mother, Martha Perez, down the street from her home in Prescott Valley, Arizona, on Sunday, March 9 2025. Courtney Pedroza for the Marshall Project

Doctors who reviewed the women's court filings and allegations say the problems described would put dialysis patients in serious danger. [Legal filings by prisoners, medical records and expert court testimony raise flags about preventable — and potentially fatal — conditions arising from substandard care. The Bureau of Prisons, which is supposed to fix those problems, operates with little to no external oversight over its medical care.](#)

A federal judge overseeing a dialysis patient's compassionate release case said testimony from seven women on dialysis was "concerning," but said he could not approve the release. Doing so, the judge said, could imply the entire Bureau of Prisons provides ineffective dialysis care.

Michele Deitch, director of the Prison and Jail Innovation Lab at the University of Texas in Austin, said people in prison "have a constitutional right to receive medical care for their serious medical needs. And dialysis is certainly an example of that."

If the federal government "cannot take care of people and meet their needs as required by the Constitution," Deitch said, "then we have no business locking them up." The Bureau of Prisons declined requests for an interview. In answers to emailed questions, spokespersons wrote that the agency provides adequate dialysis care, including sufficient staffing and education for patients.

"At present, there have been no reports or claims concerning the quality of the dialysis care being provided at FMC Carswell," wrote spokesman Donald Murphy.

[Carswell has been the subject of numerous investigations](#) calling into question its treatment of incarcerated people. In 2020 and 2021, women at the facility described [negligent medical care and malicious treatment](#) as COVID spread through the prison. In 2023, a [Fort Worth Star-Telegram investigation](#) highlighted a pattern of sexual abuse by staff. In response, a state representative called for a congressional inquiry into the prison, though none were launched.

When she died in June 2023, [Perez was one of about 15 women at Carswell receiving dialysis. The treatment uses a surgically installed port to connect a patient to a machine that filters their blood, removing toxins the kidneys no longer can process, before pumping the cleaned blood back into the patient. The process takes three to five hours and is usually needed three times a week — or patients may risk serious complications and death.](#)

Kidney failure can be caused by a multitude of issues, most commonly diabetes, high blood pressure and chronic kidney disease. Perez had all three. In June 2021, Perez started dialysis after she had a stroke.

Federal medical prisons, despite their name, are not hospital-like facilities: They keep incarcerated people with medical needs, but in many cases, do not provide all of their care in-house. Carswell, which houses approximately 1,200 people, contracts with the University of North Texas Health Science Center for much of its medical care. The Health Science Center, in turn, subcontracts dialysis services to the private provider U.S. Renal Care of West Fort Worth, according to the Bureau of Prisons. Under Carswell's contract with the Health Science Center, the bureau is still responsible for providing all dialysis equipment.

U.S. Renal Care confirmed it provides dialysis at Carswell, but did not respond to several interview requests and other emailed questions about its services there.

Dialysis is only part of the treatment for people with kidney failure. They also need a strict diet and water intake monitoring, and blood work to closely check various chemical levels. A patient's port must be kept extremely clean to avoid sepsis, a life-threatening infection.

According to Bureau of Prisons mortality reviews from 2015 to April 2020, at least three women undergoing dialysis at Carswell died in that time period. All three women had been transferred to Carswell specifically to receive medical treatment, and all three developed sepsis prior to their death, according to the mortality reviews. Reason Magazine obtained the documents through a records request and provided them to The Marshall Project.

Sepsis is far less common if staff follow the proper contamination protocols for dialysis machines, said Dr. Charles Howard, who has served as medical director at two federal prisons for over two decades.

There are no publicly available records of deaths in federal prisons. The Bureau of Prisons has yet to fulfill records requests for mortality reviews or the number of dialysis patients who have died at Carswell.

When asked how many Carswell dialysis patients have died since 2020, a bureau spokesman initially said "zero." When asked specifically about Perez, who died in 2023, spokesman Scott Taylor said that no one "had passed away as a result of their condition that required dialysis." Regarding Perez's death, Taylor said "there was no correlation between the need for dialysis and the cause of death."

Five current or former dialysis patients at Carswell spoke with The Marshall Project and also detailed in court records the dialysis conditions there. Four others described dialysis treatments in compassionate release pleas or other court records. The women said their treatment included severe cramping during dialysis, treatment sessions cut short or missed, and poor machine maintenance, such as broken parts, discolored tubing, and machine settings that were set incorrectly. Four women said pipes in the water room would break frequently, and the machines would sit in puddles of water.

"The truth lies in the consistency of the women's statements," said Amber Rabon, a lawyer in one of the women's cases, who has been a federal criminal defense attorney since 2008. Evangelina Perez, Martha Perez's daughter, said her mother told her she frequently missed dialysis treatments prior to her death in 2023.

"I can't even keep track of how many times that occurred where they wouldn't complete the dialysis on them. And that was an issue, and she would call me, she would call me panicking because she knows how she would get if she skipped one," Evangelina Perez said. "She would be so short of breath that her stomach would be tight from all the fluid she was retaining."



From left, Francisco Perez; Francisco Perez IV, 12; Daniel Perez, 14; Gabriella Perez; Evangelina Perez; Cecilia Perez, 6; and Angelica Perez pose for a portrait down the street from their home in Prescott Valley, Arizona, on Sunday, March 9, 2025. *Courtney Pedroza for the Marshall Project*

She said her mother would tell staff that something was wrong, but they “said ‘She was fine, she’s fine,’ until there was fluid literally coming out of her belly button,” Perez said.

Missing a dialysis session is dangerous for patients, said Dr. Rebecca Ahdoot, a kidney specialist at the University of California Irvine. Without rigorous dialysis, toxins can build up, and the person can die.

Alicia Elliott, who was on dialysis at Carswell for 15 months while incarcerated on drug charges, said in court records and interviews that she was forced to miss appointments or had her treatment cut short multiple times. In late 2022 and twice in early 2023, Elliot emailed Carswell’s associate warden for medical to complain about being taken off dialysis early. In one case, she said staff wanted to leave early because of ice on the roads.

Sanjuana Garcia-Ramirez started dialysis at Carswell in November 2023. She said she had been on dialysis for two years before incarceration; comparatively, she said treatments at Carswell are less consistent and the machines are poorly managed.

Read more at: <https://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/fort-worth/article313720180.html#storylink=cpy>

“I have four kids I have to get back home to, and it frightens me that I might not make it out of here because of the way they run dialysis,” said Garcia-Ramirez, who is serving a six-year sentence on a drug conviction.

Successful dialysis goes hand-in-hand with proper nutrition plans, said Howard, the former bureau medical director.

“A patient has to be their own advocate, and they have to be very, very, very much aware of what they need and what they have to do to manage their condition,” Howard said. If they’re not able to do it or they’re not properly educated, he said, “they will not do well on dialysis.”

But Stephanie Williams, who said she was on dialysis at Carswell for 11 months, said women would start dialysis and get no education on nutrition. Some women did not know that people with kidney problems have to monitor their potassium, sodium, fluid and phosphorus levels, for example, or they risk possibly fatal complications. “Them girls, when I said phosphorus, they said, ‘What is phosphorus?’ And [I was] like, ‘What are you doing?’” Williams said.

She also said in interviews and court records that women were not told how to keep their port clean — or the importance of doing so. Women would shower without covering up their ports and get them wet, which increases the risk for infection, she said. “

It’s a lack of education. It’s not the girls’ fault. But it’s killing them.”

While U.S. Renal Care oversees dialysis treatments and a nephrologist — a kidney specialist — visits once a month, patients rely on Carswell staff at all other times for medical needs. Doctors, lawyers and the Bureau of Prisons’ own budget proposal this year questioned whether Carswell has the ability and resources to provide that care.

Understaffing and a depleted budget have sapped federal prisons of resources over the last few years. In a 2024 report, the Office of the Inspector General identified providing adequate medical care as one of the primary challenges the bureau faces.

In the bureau’s 2025 budget submission to Congress, the agency lamented its difficulties in hiring and maintaining medical staff. The budget cited a 2016 Office of Inspector General report, which declared recruitment of medical professionals to be “one of the Bureau’s greatest challenges.”

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