MULTIPLE FORMAL COMPLAINTS AND FEDERAL LAWSUIT TARGET CASCADE COUNTY SYSTEM UNDER SHERIFF JESSE SLAUGHTER

Allegations of Cover-Ups, Retaliatory Policing, Jail Neglect, and Opaque Inmate Welfare Funds Mount

By Staff Writer

Great Falls, MT – Cascade County Sheriff Jesse Slaughter faces intensifying scrutiny as multiple formal complaints to the Montana Public Safety Officer Standards and Training Council (POST) and a sweeping federal civil rights lawsuit expose what critics call a "good old boy" culture of over-escalation, procedural violations, and protection of insiders at the expense of citizens and constitutional rights.

Three POST complaints against Slaughter and his deputies, combined with a new U.S. District Court filing by Great Falls resident April Ellis, paint a consistent pattern: minor incidents balloon into deadly force, public shaming, or ruined lives, while the sheriff's office and county jail—under Slaughter's direct oversight—deny accountability and basic care.

The Hanson Shooting: "Cat Food" Warrant Ends in Death On February 23, 2024, Detective Jacob Try fatally shot Michael Hanson during a surveillance visit tied to cat food and litter purchases. Try arrived alone in an unmarked vehicle, without the physical search warrant, ordered Hanson off his own property, jumped the fence, and opened fire. Independent audio analysis shows Try shot first, cleared a two-second malfunction, and fired again before Hanson returned fire.

Kathryn Hansen's March 18, 2026, POST complaint details Slaughter personally warning attendees at a public presentation not to question the case, claiming he "had a deputy to protect." Hansen notes no warrant was exhibited as required by Montana Code Annotated § 46-5-227, yet Slaughter testified under oath there was "absolutely no unlawful activity" and awarded Try the Law Enforcement Purple Heart.

Tony Rosales' March 23, 2026, complaint demands discipline against both Try and Slaughter, highlighting the lack of backup, absent warrant, and Slaughter's public claim that a warrant "is not required" for ordering someone off their property—a stance critics call a blatant Fourth Amendment violation.

The Pinocci Arrest: Press Conference and Mugshot Blast Over Dismissed Charges

On October 13, 2023, Sheriff Slaughter held a press conference announcing the arrest of elected official and Senate candidate Randall Pinocci on felony witness-tampering charges. Within hours, the sheriff's office mass-emailed Pinocci's mugshot and details county-wide. Former County Commissioner Rae Grulkowski stated that the press-conference release was circulated to all county personnel. She further remarked that she was unaware of any prior instance in which an APB-style notification had been issued to publicize a press conference regarding an individual's arrest. She added that Commissioner Pinocci, as an elected official, should not be subjected to different treatment than any other person who is arrested.

The selected distribution of his arrest information raises serious concerns about unequal treatment and the appearance of discrimination. Public officials are entitled to the same procedural fairness and protections afforded to all others, and any deviation from

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standard practice warrants careful review.

Pinocci's POST complaint states the underlying text messages showed the alleged witness initiated contact, and even Slaughter's own description at the press conference demonstrated the conduct "did not meet the legal elements" of the offense. All charges were dismissed. Pinocci calls the spectacle a political hit job that cost him $40,000 in legal fees and expenses, not to mention reputational harm during his campaign—precisely the kind of selective enforcement that undermines equal justice.

April Ellis Federal Lawsuit: Retaliatory Hand-Gesture Arrest, 24-Hour No-Miranda Detention, and Jail Medical Neglect

A federal civil rights complaint filed by April Ellis in U.S. District Court for Montana (Great Falls Division) adds explosive new allegations against Great Falls police, Cascade County Prosecutor Neil Anthon, municipal judges, the City of Great Falls, and—critically—County of Cascade for deliberate indifference at the detention center under Sheriff Slaughter's command.

Ellis alleges Officer Frank Torres stopped her June 6, 2023, solely for an apologetic hand gesture (protected First Amendment speech). Dashcam captured Torres telling Sergeant Thomas Lynch the basis was "the hand gesture thing." Torres later admitted under oath there was no traffic violation—she fully stopped at the yield sign—and he intended only a verbal warning (for which no ID was required). Despite this, he demanded identification, violently yanked her door handle, threatened to smash her window, and arrested her without probable cause.

Reports indicate Torres removed his body microphone before the interaction, leaving the dashcam as the primary record. Ellis was subsequently held overnight at Cascade County Detention Center without Miranda warnings for approximately 24 hours. During an asthma attack, a nurse refused her rescue inhaler, repeatedly stating, "If you're conscious, you can breathe," leading to bronchitis and respiratory complications. The lawsuit names the County of Cascade for Monell liability, alleging policies, customs, and deliberate indifference to medical needs in the facility Slaughter directly oversees.

Ellis further alleges she was served into a systematic "two-tier" justice scheme where the court knowingly created a secondary system for public defense cases. Judge Steven Bolstad unlawfully appointed substitute Judge Ashley Wilkinson just three days before trial in violation of MCA § 3-6-204 (none of the statutory prerequisites existed, and Bolstad had previously disqualified her for conflicts). Bolstad is also accused of weaponizing MCA § 3-1-805 to bypass constitutional protections. A biased juror—an eight-year friend of Torres who admitted he would presume the officer truthful—was retained. Prosecutor Anthon poisoned the jury pool by asking if anyone was affiliated with "sovereign citizens" (FBI-designated domestic terrorists), despite zero connection to the case. Evidentiary rules were applied asymmetrically, favoring the prosecution. Ellis was acquitted of reckless driving but convicted of obstruction; that conviction is on appeal to the Montana Supreme Court (DA 25-0460).

Inmate Welfare Funds: Another Layer of Unanswered Questions at the Jail

Further concerns surround the management of the Cascade County Detention Center's Inmate Welfare Fund (or equivalent commissary/canteen fund). These special revenue accounts—generated from inmate canteen sales, telephone commissions, and confiscated contraband—are legally required to benefit the inmate population exclusively through items such as indigent hygiene kits, recreational equipment, educational and religious supplies, inmate wages, release assistance, and burial costs. State law (MCA 53-1-109) and parallel local practices prohibit mingling these funds with general jail operations. Facility administrators must solicit inmate input on the annual budget and hold monthly meetings with inmate representatives to review income and expenditures.

A 2022 legislative audit of the Montana Department of Corrections' statewide IWF revealed more than $50,000 spent on inappropriate items that should have come from the general budget; the department agreed to correct the errors. While state prisons fall under DOC oversight, county jails such as Cascade County's are managed directly by the sheriff's office. Amid the facility's documented crises—multiple inmate suicides with $750,000+ in settlements, blood-contaminated food lawsuits, three deaths in two weeks in 2024, and the deliberate-indifference claims in the Ellis federal lawsuit—critics are demanding full public disclosure and independent review of Cascade's IWF expenditures to ensure funds generated by inmates are actually improving inmate welfare rather than quietly supporting operations.

Pattern of Over-Escalation and Protection Under Slaughter

Montana law (MCA § 45-8-101) allows citations or arrests for disorderly conduct when quarreling or abusive language disrupts the peace—yet Slaughter's department and the interconnected county system repeatedly turn routine encounters into lethal force (Hanson), public spectacles (Pinocci), or retaliatory prosecutions (Ellis). The sheriff has defended "absolutely no unlawful activity" while the jail he commands racks up $750,000+ in suicide settlements, blood-contaminated food lawsuits, and now deliberate-indifference claims.

Employee reviews describe a "toxic" 2.7/5 management culture. Slaughter refuses independent polygraph scrutiny while using the tool on suspects. Critics say this is classic "good old boy" lawfare: protect deputies and insiders, escalate against citizens who push back, and shield the system at all costs.

The POST complaints and Ellis lawsuit demand independent investigation, discipline, and reform. With voters heading to the polls June 2, the question is whether Cascade County will continue tolerating a sheriff who claims the "constitutional" title but delivers cover-ups, overreach, and neglect—or finally demand accountability that puts citizens, not the club, first. The response from POST, the federal court, and the ballot box will decide.