

Metheny receives early release from prison

By Terri Harber Updated: Sep 29, 2021 05:08 PM



Helicopter company executive said to be too ill to stay in medium security prison facility

A federal judge last week decided to grant the motion for a compassionate release from prison made by former Grants Pass helicopter company executive Steven Metheny, who was found guilty in June of 2015 of falsifying aircraft documents. His actions to make the helicopter appear able to safely hold a much large amount of weight led to the fatal

crash that killed seven Southern Oregon firefighters and two pilots.

Four people survived the crash, including the copilot, but they were seriously injured as all were on their way to assist with the wildland firefighting efforts during the summer of 2008, according to previous reports.

Metheny, 51, was sentenced to serve 151 months in prison in 2015 and had been assigned to the Federal Correctional Institution in Lompoc, California.

He first sought the sentence reduction in October of 2020 and in March filed a supplement to that motion. The court received information from the defendant and the government over ensuing months, which has resulted in the decision made by U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken.

"The Court finds that defendant, (Metheny) has established extraordinary and compelling reasons to warrant a reduction of defendant's sentence. ..." Aiken wrote in her decision filed Sept. 22.

Parents of some of the victims reacted to the judge's decision with sadness and anger.

Paul Steele, father of 19-year-old David Steele of Ashland, one of the firefighters who died as a result of the crash, questioned why Metheny was being shown compassion

when he was not only “uncompassionate” but not convicted for manslaughter.

“His lies, greed and disrespect for human life was brought to life through extensive investigation and legal proceedings,” Steele wrote in a letter to the court expressing his opinion about the prospect of releasing Metheny from prison early. “This greedy and terrible man clearly has no compassion for others’ lives, and in turn is deserving of none from our legal system.”

An early release for the defendant would harm the victims’ families, he wrote.

“Even writing this letter is difficult and filled with the tears of grief beyond words,” Steele also wrote. “Justice and compassion for the families demands he pay for his egregious crimes.”

And Nina Charlson, mother of 25-year-old Scott Charlson of Phoenix, another one of the firefighters who died in the crash, was equally heartbroken and upset.

“If it was a stupid mistake we would still have heartache but we all make mistakes. It was not a mistake. He plotted and planned to lie to the government. After the crash happened he plotted and planned to cover his plot up, she wrote after receiving the news.

“He has put his family as well as many firefighters and their families through much trauma, torment and heartache as well as snuffed the life out of 9 men who had so much life left to live. And he wants compassion. I have no more words to say,” she also wrote.

The judge’s decision

Aiken explained that Metheny’s time and experiences in prison — especially with his health problems — have “been harsher than the sentence originally contemplated at the time of sentencing.”

In March of 2019, Metheny suffered “severe chest pain, elevated blood pressure, and an abnormal echocardiogram, which resulted in a three-day hospitalization,” the judge stated.

In May of 2020, he also tested positive for COVID-19, suffered minor symptoms and received one of two doses of the Pfizer vaccine. Records don’t note whether he received a second dose, however.

And this year Metheny’s health “began to deteriorate,” Aiken wrote.

He suffered such ailments as severe eye pressure, vision problems and migraine headaches. In February, a nurse-practitioner found that his blood pressure was even higher

than when he had been hospitalized in early 2019.

In April an echocardiogram showed that Metheny had sinus tachycardia, which is an abnormal heart rate. He also further complained about chest pain and heart palpitations and was diagnosed with hypertension and prescribed the drug lisinopril, the judge also said in her order.

In June, his dosage of lisinopril was increased and the medication hydrochlorothiazide was added to his drug regimen.

Metheny saw a cardiologist in July and that physician diagnosed him as having an abnormal heart rate, chest pain and hypertension. While the doctor stopped his lisinopril, no alternative medication was prescribed by medical services in the prison.

Metheny also reported fatigue, shortness of breath as well as rashes and dizziness when sitting or standing. At 51, he was considered obese with a Body Mass Index of 30.1 — another health risk.

Aiken said Metheny has met the “extraordinary and compelling reasons” criteria for compassionate release because during the pandemic many courts recognize that such chronic medical conditions may substantially increase an inmate’s risk of becoming “seriously ill or dying from

COVID-19."

Even if he were fully vaccinated against the virus, the defendant's physical condition places him at risk and he remains at risk of re-infection.

"Moreover, defendant has experienced both inadequate care and significant delays in evaluations and treatment that have substantially diminished his ability to treat and manage heart conditions while at FCI Lompoc," Aiken stated.

Now Metheny will be required to enter into the Northwest Regional Reentry Center for 364 days— once there is an opening. The organization helps offenders transition to life outside of prison but there were no openings when he was released.

He was sent home to wait until an opening came available.

After that, he will be confined at home and be required to serve 800 hours of community service under the direction of a probation officer and participate in telephonic status hearings beginning in November.

The goal of the sentence modification is to mete out a sentence that is "'sufficient but not greater than necessary' to reflect the gravity and seriousness of his offense, promote respect for the law, provide a punishment, adequately deter criminal conduct, protect the public from

future crimes at defendant's hands, and most effectively provide defendant with the training, medical care and correctional treatment that he needs," Aiken added.