

LONG READS

Misgendered and mistreated in jail: A Pinellas transgender woman shares her story

What Karla Bello endured in the Pinellas County jail is emblematic of the way transgender people are treated while incarcerated, say advocates for transgender rights.





Karla Bello, 37, takes a break under the Tarpon Springs home where she lives with a home healthcare client. In November, Bello, a transgender woman, was booked into the Pinellas County jail and placed into male housing, where she said she was repeatedly misgendered and mistreated by jail deputies. [DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times]

By **Kathryn Varn**

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Karla Bello lost more than her freedom when she entered the Pinellas County jail. She lost herself.

When the 37-year-old transgender woman was booked on a charge stemming from unpaid traffic fines, she told a jail worker she was a woman. She had started transitioning in her early 30s.

But she was strip-searched by male deputies and placed in a male cell block. Deputies called her “sir.”

She couldn’t wear her hair extensions or makeup, nor did she have access to her hormone medication — the basics she needed to treat a medical condition called gender dysphoria. It can occur when one’s gender doesn’t align with their sex assigned at birth.

“It’s so stupid to cry about hair and about makeup,” she told the *Tampa Bay Times*, her voice breaking. “But when they take who you say you are away — oh my God.”



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By *B&H Photo Video*

By day seven, she was suicidal, under close observation by jail staff.

“I’m going to die in here,” she remembers thinking. “I’m just going to end my life.”

Incarceration is already dehumanizing. But it can be even more unforgiving for those who faced discrimination and marginalization before they were locked up.

What Bello endured is emblematic of the way transgender people are treated while incarcerated, advocates for transgender rights say.

Studies show they are disproportionately locked up and more likely to be abused by staff and fellow inmates. That can lead to trauma and depression and, in extreme cases, murder or suicide.

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days in jail — particularly in misgendering her.

The Sheriff's Office encourages deputies to use the names and pronouns true to the individual, he said. But it's not a written policy.

"We don't need to traumatize these people," Gualitieri said, "so I'll look at that."

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Born in Mexico, Bello grew up in Wimauma in a Catholic family.

At age 7 or 8, she said, she started to realize what she felt inside didn't align with the way she looked.

Soon after, she stumbled on a drag queen performing on a TV show. The revelation, that she could wear glitzy dresses and bright lipstick, excited her.

Then her mother spoke up:

"Oh, those people are disgusting," Bello recalled her saying.

The reaction shut down her self-exploration for years.

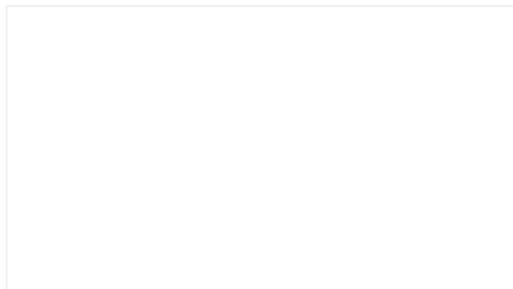
She graduated from Wharton High School in New Tampa in 2000, then enlisted in the Army. Bello tried to bury the sense that she was a woman, hoping it would

She tried dating men while stationed in Germany, but the homophobic ridicule from fellow soldiers was too much to handle. Ultimately, she was honorably discharged, she said, under the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, which banned gay and lesbian service members until it was repealed in 2011.

Back home, she found a passion working as a caregiver for adults with disabilities. She understood what it was like to live with a body she couldn’t control.

Karla Bello washes dishes at the home where she lives with a home healthcare client. [DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times]

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It took time and prayer — Bello still finds solace in a nondenominational relationship with God — before she reached a point where she believed she could start living as a woman.

She started hormone therapy about four years ago, at first under the supervision of a doctor. But the transition took a toll on her caregiving business. She said she lost jobs due to discrimination.

She found another way to get hormones, without pricey doctor visits, and shifted her focus to launching her own business.

Despite those setbacks, she felt good.

“I’ve never felt more comfortable in my skin and happier than when I started taking the hormones,” she said.

Then in 2018, cameras caught her running red lights in Tampa and Brandon. She was mailed two tickets, each requiring her to pay a \$261 fine.

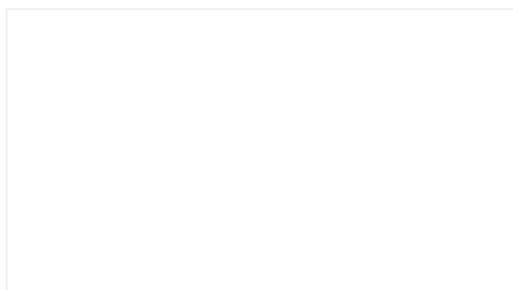
She didn’t get them, Bello said. By the time she found out about the tickets, she was struggling to find steady work and housing and couldn’t afford to pay them.

Eventually, the state suspended her license. When she was pulled over again in October 2019, this time for having a broken taillight, police gave her another ticket for driving with a suspended license.

She was supposed to appear in court Nov. 4.

Bello’s life continued to unravel. Friendships and relationships started to fall apart. That included her mother, Bello said, who didn’t accept her transition. Bello cut off contact.

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“I didn't feel like anyone loved me,” she said.

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When she didn't make it to her court hearing, authorities issued an arrest warrant.

Later that month, Bello intervened in a family issue involving one of her home healthcare clients. She called the police, knowing the risk she was taking.

Four days after officers responded to her call, one drove by that Gulfport home and checked the license plate on a car in the driveway.

It was Bello's Nissan Cube, and a records search turned up the active warrant. Gulfport police arrested her on a charge of failing to appear in court. She was booked into the Pinellas County jail Nov. 29.

Her bail was set at \$513.

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News reports paint a bleak picture of how transgender inmates, particularly women of color, are treated.

A Florida woman was found dead in her cell in 2016 after the state Department of Corrections denied her request for a name change.

In 2019, a woman held in New York City's Rikers Island died in solitary confinement. Her bail was \$500.

The same year, a lawsuit filed on behalf of 170 trans women alleged systemic abuse behind bars in Colorado.

In 2017, President Barack Obama's administration alleviated some of the risk by allowing transgender inmates to be housed according to their gender identity.

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Those protections have been weakened under President Donald Trump, said Richard Saenz, a senior attorney for the LGBTQ civil rights organization Lambda Legal. Saenz specializes in criminal justice and police misconduct.

In 2018, the federal Bureau of Prisons changed its transgender offender rules. Now, inmates are housed initially based on one's "biological sex" — a term the government doesn't define, Saenz noted — instead of their gender identity. The new rules also limit transgender inmates' access to hormones and other medical options.

Denying gender dysphoria treatment is a well-documented problem across the country. Courts have repeatedly sided with inmates who have challenged these restrictions, deciding that the rules violate Eighth Amendment protections against cruel and unusual punishment.

Treating gender dysphoria can go beyond hormones and surgery, said Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, deputy executive director for policy and action at the National Center for Transgender Equality. It also can include products and procedures that help someone express their gender identity, such as makeup, hair extensions and laser hair removal.

"The stakes are really high," he said. "Things that in the outside world may seem like just a matter of appearance — it can be a matter of life or death."

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The new, harsher rules don't apply to inmates in state prisons or, as in Bello's case, county jails, Saenz said. But he said they can set the tone for how trans people are treated in those institutions.

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Florida's prison system determines housing assignments on a case-by-case basis that takes into consideration the inmate's safety and prison security. The Department of Corrections also has a policy for how to identify and treat inmates diagnosed with gender dysphoria.

But there are no consistent rules for how transgender people should be treated in Florida's county jails. The Florida Model Jail Standards Committee decides how prisoners should be treated in them. The committee is made up of three sheriffs, a county commissioner and a county director of corrections.

Those standards do not even mention transgender people.

The issue has not been raised before the committee, said James Aguiar, a Sumter County Sheriff's Office accreditation inspector who works with the group.

Even if there were rules to protect transgender inmates, Aguiar said the jail standards committee has no way to sanction a jail that doesn't comply.

The Prison Rape Elimination Act, a federal law passed in 2003 to protect vulnerable inmates from sexual violence, offers some guidance to prisons and jails for how to treat transgender prisoners. However, advocates say it is often not enforced.

Trans rights activists complain that this has allowed each facility to set its own rules.

"Depending on what your zip code is dictates which rights and protections you have," said Gina Duncan, director of transgender equality for Equality Florida.

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For example, Pasco County allows transgender inmates to pick the gender of the deputy who will search them, while Hillsborough County has no policies guiding how transgender prisoners should be searched.

Duncan said one of the better housing policies was created by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office.

In Duval County jails, a policy allows transgender inmates and other at-risk inmates to be kept in an open dorm away from the jail's regular population.

Officer Christian Hancock, a sheriff's spokesman, said inmates are let out of their cells one at a time for limited periods.

Not only are the rules inconsistent, but there's no mechanism for tracking how many trans people cycle through Florida's county jails. None of Tampa Bay's jails keep count.

The state prison system does, although they may be undercounted if inmates don't disclose their gender identity.

The Florida Department of Corrections said last week there were about 410 inmates in state prisons who identified as transgender and about 150 diagnosed with gender dysphoria.

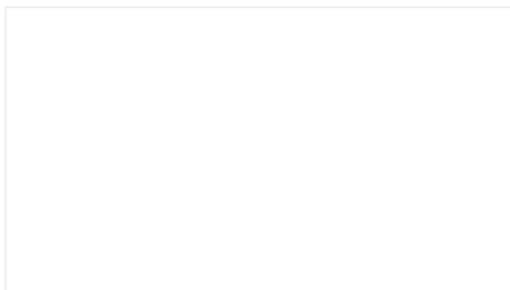
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When Bello was booked into the jail, she was wearing a dress, boots, a cardigan, blond hair extensions and a wire bra, jail records show.

Bras with underwire are prohibited in the jail, so it was confiscated along with everything else, per jail policy.

Bello hasn't changed her name or gender, so her name and sex assigned at birth still show up on arrest documents. The process can cost hundreds of dollars, and

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Bello said she told a jail staffer she was a woman, that her name was Karla.

Still, she said, what followed was an “onslaught of misgendering.” Deputies used her deadname, or her birth name. Misgendering even extended to her jail records.

It wore her down, she said. She didn’t know how else to explain her situation.

She was placed in temporary housing with men. Many inmates leave on bail, but Bello couldn’t afford hers, and said she had no one to call for help.

She went through a classification process to determine where she would be housed. Staffers look at factors such as criminal history and mental health. They assess whether the inmate poses a threat to others or could be a target for sexual violence. Gender identity and sexual orientation are taken into account.

Bello was labeled a “potential victim,” records show. Those inmates have the option of being placed in protective custody, akin to solitary confinement.

In the Pinellas jail, protective custody means living alone, save for time out for showers, an hour of recreation and limited activities, such as religious services or visits from the outside.

Gualtieri said Bello declined when his staff gave her the option of being placed in protective custody. Bello said she wasn’t given any such option.

She was placed in a male housing unit. It was uncomfortable, she said, having to change clothes in corners. One inmate used a slur for transgender people against her, she said.

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She now wishes she could have stayed “anywhere but ... with the men.”

Karla Bello sorts through her makeup while getting ready for a walk. [DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times]

Why couldn't Bello stay with women, the gender with which she identifies? The jail classification policy calls for assessing the needs of each inmate. But in practice, trans inmates generally have only two options: protective custody, or male or female general population housing based on their genitalia, Gualtieri said.

“I know enough about operating that facility and the issues and the challenges that I'm not going to put someone with male genitalia in the female side,” he said. “There's no way I'm going to do that and have a situation where people are having sex in the jail.”

shelter his agency runs in the jail complex, he said, not inside the jail itself.

Using only genitalia to determine housing is a violation of the federal Rape Elimination Act. Gualtieri said his agency is not violating federal policy because inmates who don't feel safe have the option of protective custody.

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Studies, though, show that option puts inmates at risk of severe psychological harm.

Even Gualtieri himself described that option as "hell."

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Bello was not only assigned to male housing but strip-searched by two male deputies.

That violated Sheriff's Office policy. If it had been followed, a female deputy would have searched Bello from the waist up, then a male deputy would have finished the search.

Bello said she would have requested a female deputy had she known that was an option. Instead, she said nothing. She just wanted to get it over with.

"It felt like I didn't have a choice," she said.

When the *Times* asked Gualtieri to review Bello's treatment, he initially said the search was done properly. But when a *Times* reporter pointed out a record that showed otherwise, he said he had based his earlier answer on incorrect information.

Still, he defended his deputies, saying that, dressed in jail scrubs surrounded by other men, Bello "from what everyone is saying presented as a male." He said he would look at ways to help transgender people understand their options while in jail.

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That explanation did not sit well with Bello. She said she repeatedly told deputies her name and gender. She also pointed out that her gender was clear based on her appearance when she first entered the jail.



Bello also struggled to treat her gender dysphoria.

She didn't have a current prescription for hormone therapy, which Gualtieri said is why she couldn't continue the treatment in jail. The sheriff said he wouldn't have had a problem with a jail doctor prescribing them, but Bello wasn't there long enough for that.

When she was booked into the jail she had no money for the commissary, she said, so she couldn't buy a bra to replace the one that was confiscated. She wasn't in jail long enough to obtain a package of necessities for indigent inmates that includes a bra.

Her hair extensions were confiscated. She didn't have access to tweezers to remove facial hair and, unlike the razors that inmates are provided, keep her skin soft and stubble-free. So she turned to toothpaste, letting it dry on her face and plucking each hair with her fingers.

And she didn't have makeup. Gualtieri said no inmates are allowed to wear makeup, regardless of gender identity.

So Bello used colored pencils from the commissary, gifted to her by a departing inmate, to mimic it. Deputies told her to remove it, she said. She thought in vain of the message from an old cosmetics commercial: "When you're having a bad day, just put on red lipstick."

Karla Bello applies lipstick before taking a walk. [DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times]



“I understand it’s jail. It’s not supposed to be comfortable,” Bello said. “But at the same time I’m trying to articulate why it was so wrong and painful and inhumane.”

She spiraled into a deep depression and ended up in a single cell, under close observation by jail staff.

Up until that point, she was allowed to continue wearing a binding bottom undergarment called a gaff. But when she was placed under observation, deputies confiscated it as a safety precaution.

It was one blow too many, Bello said. She had a breakdown.

“I was so angry,” she said. “I went crazy in there. They made me crazy.”

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Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741; or chat with someone online at suicidepreventionlifeline.org. The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay can be reached by dialing 211 or by visiting crisiscenter.com.

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On day 11, Bello got a visitor.

On the other side of the jail video screen was Tampa lawyer Rook Elizabeth Ringer, who is also transgender. She heard about Bello's plight from a friend and came to check on her. Bello shared her story.

Ringer reached out to members of Trans Mission Media, a local transgender advocacy organization. The organization has an arm called the Canary Project focused on helping people like Bello, who are awaiting trial in jail with the wrong population.

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Bello needed their help, Ringer told members Penelope Minot and Stephanie Foglia. Bello's treatment troubled the group.

"Pinellas County and Hillsborough County are supposed to be LGBT-friendly ... then to have these atrocities," Foglia said. "The point is to be treated with dignity. It makes a difference."

Minot started a Facebook fundraiser to raise money to pay Bello's bail. They raised \$795 and arranged a place for Bello to stay.

Bello walked out Dec. 10, bewildered but free.

Karla Bello attends a Pinellas County court hearing with her attorney, Rook Elizabeth Ringer. [MARTHA ASECIO RHINE | Times]

She's sharing her story in the hope that what happened to her doesn't happen to the next trans person who ends up in jail.

"There should be a different way of doing things," she said. Jails "are not supposed to leave you feeling crippled, wanting to take your life."

Since she got out, Bello has moved to Tarpon Springs, into the home of a new client, and is figuring out her next steps. Last week, her license was reinstated after she paid her fines. She also pleaded down her criminal charge to a driving infraction.

On a recent afternoon, Bello sat with Ringer in a Pinellas County courtroom.

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Long blond hair fell over her shoulders. She wore an electric blue jacket with a black-and-white striped top, black skirt and over-the-knee boots. Pearl bracelets hugged her wrists.

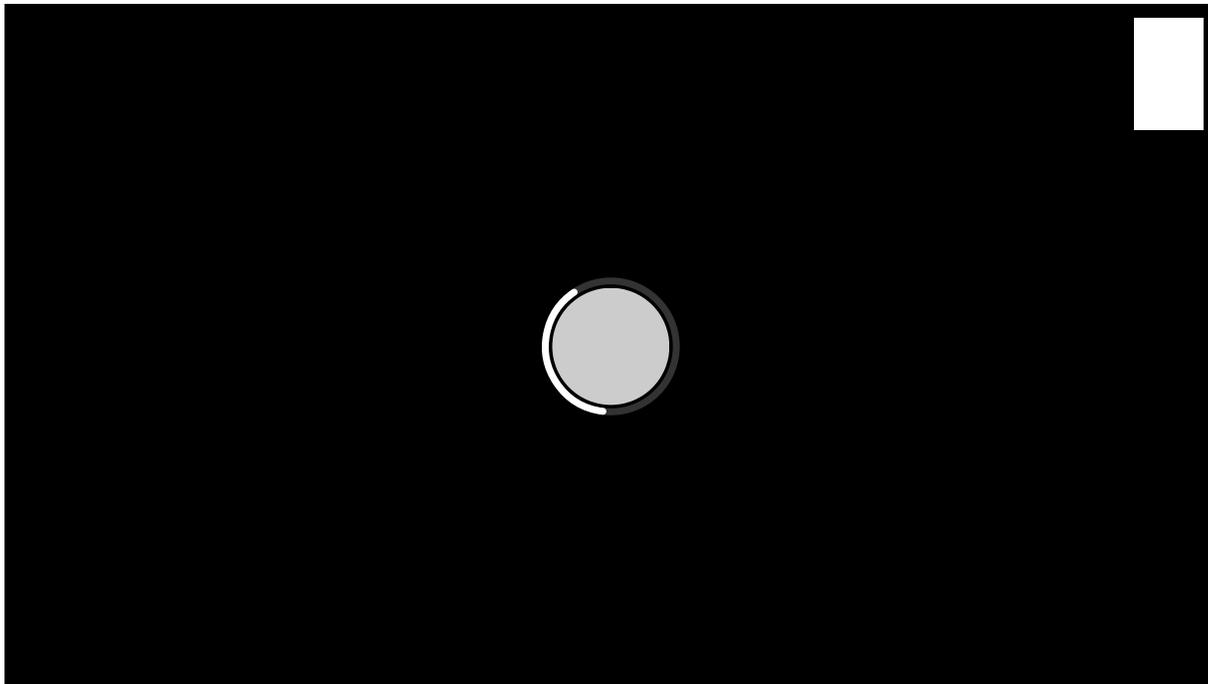
Times senior researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report.

Clarification: The Florida Model Jail Standards Committee cannot sanction jails. But jails can violate state laws. An official who advises the committee was imprecise on this point in an earlier version of this story.

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