

State of Caldwell

v.

Vera Holloway

CHARGE	DEFENDANT	PLEA
Reckless Endangerment in the First Degree (Felony, Class C)	Vera Holloway, Age 52 Owner/Operator, The Holloway House Haunted Attraction, Caldwell	Not Guilty

The Holloway House has operated as a seasonal Halloween attraction in downtown Caldwell since 2019. Occupying a renovated Victorian-era warehouse on Gravesend Street, the venue features professional theatrical design, licensed pyrotechnic effects, and original set construction. It draws an estimated 12,000 visitors each October and has received regional recognition for immersive design. In six prior seasons, the attraction had no structural incidents.

On October 28, 2025 — the penultimate weekend of the season — a section of elevated staging known internally as "Dead Man's Bridge" partially collapsed at 9:47 PM. The wooden walkway, suspended eight feet above the main floor, failed along its north railing while fourteen visitors were present. Seven sustained minor contusions. Visitor Demi Torres, age 16, suffered a fractured wrist and a Grade II concussion after falling through the failed railing section.

Three weeks earlier, on October 7, Caldwell County Inspector Reed Nakamura conducted a routine annual inspection of the attraction. His report — received by Holloway on October 9 — flagged the elevated walkway as "a structure of concern," citing "potential overloading risk under peak conditions" and recommending that the posted maximum occupancy be reviewed. Nakamura did not issue a stop-use order or require closure. Holloway's response was to replace the bridge's capacity sign, lowering the posted maximum from 12 to 10 persons. No structural assessment or reinforcement was undertaken. The attraction continued operating for three additional weeks.

The prosecution alleges that receiving a written structural warning and responding only with a revised sign — no engineering follow-up, no enforcement mechanism — constitutes a conscious disregard of a substantial and unjustifiable risk. Surveillance footage confirms fourteen visitors were on the bridge at collapse: forty percent above the revised posted limit of ten. The State contends a sign alone cannot substitute for structural remediation when a structural concern has been formally documented.

The defense maintains that Nakamura's decision not to red-tag the structure is itself evidence the risk was not imminent. Holloway acted on the recommendation she received. The defense argues the proximate cause was visitors' violation of clearly posted rules, and that a signed visitor waiver explicitly places capacity-compliance responsibility on visitors themselves. Vera Holloway now stands trial. She pleads Not Guilty.

Witness Statements

Prosecution Witness 1: Inspector Reed Nakamura

Caldwell County Infrastructure & Safety Office — Seasonal Structures Division

"My name is Reed Nakamura. I have been a certified structural safety inspector with Caldwell County for nine years, focused on seasonal and temporary structures — haunted attractions, outdoor stages, festival platforms. These structures require annual inspection before they may open to the public.

I inspected The Holloway House on October 7. The framing on Dead Man's Bridge appeared intact under the moderate load present during my visit. What concerned me was the risk profile under peak conditions — the kind of Saturday-night crowd this venue routinely draws. I documented that risk, recommended a review of the posted occupancy, and sent the report the following day. My recommendation was to determine what the structure could actually hold — which typically involves an engineering assessment — and then manage accordingly.

I did not issue a stop-use order. I want to be direct: a stop-use order requires an active hazard — cracked members, failed hardware, visible deterioration. I observed none of those things. What I observed was a condition that demanded professional follow-through. Simply changing the number on a sign is not what I intended. There is no mechanism in a fog-filled, strobe-lit corridor that stops the eleventh person from stepping onto a structure posted for ten. A sign alone is not a safety measure."

Prosecution Witness 2: Demi Torres

Injured Visitor; Age 16 at Time of Incident

"My name is Demi Torres. I'm sixteen. On October 28, I went to The Holloway House with five friends — I'd been the Halloween before and loved it. I want to be upfront: there is a civil case related to this. But I'm here because I think the facts matter.

When we reached the elevated walkway, a staff member in costume was directing people at the entrance. We didn't make a choice to go up — we were waved forward as part of the normal route through the attraction. It was dark. There were strobe lights and theatrical fog. I did not count how many people were on the bridge when I stepped on. I don't think you could.

I was about eight feet in when the railing gave way on my right. I fell. I broke my wrist and hit my head. I was in the emergency room until two in the morning and out of school for three weeks from the concussion. I still get headaches.

I was guided onto that structure by a Holloway House employee. I followed where the staff pointed me. I do not think that should make this my fault."

Witness Statements

Defense Witness 1: Dr. Sylvie Park, P.E.

Licensed Structural Engineer — Park & Associates Consulting

"My name is Dr. Sylvie Park. I am a licensed professional engineer with twenty-two years of experience in structural load analysis and temporary structure assessment. I was retained by the defense. My fee is a flat consulting rate, not contingent on the outcome.

Based on my post-incident analysis of the recovered structural components, Dead Man's Bridge was built from pressure-treated lumber with metal joist hangers rated for a combined load of approximately 1,400 pounds. Using standard estimates — roughly 135 pounds per person for a mixed-age group — ten visitors yields approximately 1,350 pounds: within safe tolerance. Fourteen visitors yields approximately 1,890 pounds: more than 35 percent above the design load. The structure failed because it was overloaded.

Inspector Nakamura did not red-tag this structure. That decision is consistent with my analysis: there was no pre-existing defect, no wood deterioration, no failed hardware. The capacity sign Ms. Holloway posted — ten persons — was structurally appropriate. Had that limit been observed, there would have been no collapse. How fourteen visitors came to be on the bridge simultaneously is a crowd-management question, not a structural one."

Defense Witness 2: Owen Holloway

Floor Guide, The Holloway House; Son of Defendant

"My name is Owen Holloway. I'm twenty-six. I've worked every October season here since my mom opened in 2019. I was on the floor on October 28. I know how this looks — I'm her son. I understand the court will weigh that. All I can offer is what I actually know.

The protocol for Dead Man's Bridge is simple: a guide stands at the entrance, counts visitors in, and holds the queue at ten. That night I was stationed two sections earlier. My understanding from what I've seen and been told is that there was a surge — a large group moved through the corridor faster than anticipated. The staff member on bridge duty made a judgment call in the moment that, in hindsight, was the wrong one.

When my mother received Inspector Nakamura's report, she sat down with me and our head of operations. We revised the capacity sign. We ran a retraining with the full floor staff on the counting protocol. She did not shrug it off. She took every concrete step she was advised to take.

I believe what happened was a failure in execution on one very busy night — at the crowd level, not the management level. My mother did not ignore a danger. She managed it the way a reasonable operator would, and then one terrible thing happened anyway. I am biased. But that is the truth as I know it."

Exhibit 1

CALDWELL COUNTY INFRASTRUCTURE & SAFETY OFFICE

Seasonal Venue Inspection Report | Report No. CCI-2025-1007-HH

Venue:	The Holloway House, 14 Gravesend St., Caldwell
Inspection Date:	October 7, 2025
Inspector:	Reed Nakamura — Seasonal Structures Division
Inspection Type:	Annual Pre-Season Structural Review (Temporary/Theatrical Structures)
Report Issued:	October 8, 2025 Received by Operator: October 9, 2025

Inspection Findings

#	STRUCTURE / AREA	FINDING	ACTION
1	Main floor set construction (ground level)	Structural framing intact. Anchoring hardware within tolerance. No deficiencies noted.	None required
2	Emergency egress routes (4 exits inspected)	All exits accessible, marked, and illuminated. Compliant with CCC §44.2.	None required
3	Elevated walkway "Dead Man's Bridge" (+8 ft above main floor)	Potential overloading risk under peak conditions. Structure intact under moderate load at time of inspection. Posted maximum occupancy (12 persons) should be reviewed relative to actual peak attendance. Recommend engineering review of load capacity.	Review posted max. occupancy. No stop-use order issued.
4	Pyrotechnic / fog machine installation	Licensed devices properly distanced from combustibles. Fog machine placement compliant.	None required

Inspector's Summary Note: No stop-use orders issued. Venue may proceed with seasonal operation. The operator is directed to address Finding #3 at the operator's discretion prior to or during the operational season. This report does not constitute a certification that the elevated walkway is structurally sound under all load conditions.

Exhibit 2

INCIDENT RECONSTRUCTION — DEAD MAN'S BRIDGE

Caldwell Police Dept. — Evidence Summary | Case No. CPD-2025-10-0341

Surveillance Footage Analysis — Visitor Count at Time of Collapse

TIMESTAMP	EVENT	VISITORS ON BRIDGE
9:38 PM	Bridge section clear; new group queuing at entrance	0
9:39 PM	First 6 visitors enter bridge section; staff guide present at entrance	6
9:41 PM	4 additional visitors enter; posted maximum (10) reached	10
9:43 PM	4 additional visitors enter — posted maximum exceeded	14
9:47 PM	North railing fails; partial collapse; visitors fall to main floor	14
9:48 PM	Emergency stop activated; venue evacuated; EMS called	—

Capacity Signage — History

VERSION	MAX POSTED	DATE EFFECTIVE	BASIS
Original (Season Opening)	12 persons	Oct 1, 2025	Operator-set; pre-inspection
Revised (post-inspection)	10 persons	Oct 10, 2025	Holloway's response to Finding #3; no engineering assessment conducted

Note: No structural engineering assessment, reinforcement work, or contractor invoice for bridge-related repairs was identified in venue maintenance records for the period October 9–October 28, 2025. Confirmed by review of vendor records and maintenance logs obtained by the Caldwell Police Department.

Exhibit 3

The Holloway House — Visitor Waiver and Rules of Entry (2025 Season) Signed by authorized adult guardian prior to entry for all visitor groups including minors Exhibit copy certified by Caldwell Police Dept. — Case No.

CPD-2025-10-0341

◆ THE HOLLOWAY HOUSE ◆

Est. 2019 — 14 Gravesend Street, Caldwell

VISITOR WAIVER & CONDITIONS OF ENTRY — 2025 SEASON

By entering The Holloway House, visitors and their authorized guardians acknowledge and agree to the following conditions:

- 1. Inherent Risk.** The Holloway House contains theatrical effects including strobe lighting, artificial fog, sudden sounds, confined spaces, and elevated walkways. Visitors acknowledge these elements carry inherent risks and enter voluntarily.
- 2. Health Conditions.** Not recommended for individuals with heart conditions, epilepsy, pregnancy, or mobility limitations. Visitors certify they have no such conditions or accept full responsibility.
- 3. Visitor Conduct.** Visitors must follow all posted rules and staff instructions at all times. Visitors who are disruptive, intoxicated, or who violate posted rules will be removed without refund.
- 4. Capacity Limits.** All posted capacity limits must be strictly observed. Visitors must not enter any section of the attraction when the posted maximum occupancy has been reached. Violation of posted capacity limits is grounds for immediate removal.
- 5. Assumption of Risk / Release.** To the fullest extent permitted by law, visitors and guardians release The Holloway House and its operators from liability arising from inherent risks or from visitor non-compliance with posted rules and staff instructions.

The Holloway House | 14 Gravesend Street, Caldwell | thehollowayhouse.com

Note: The prosecution argues that Demi Torres was actively guided onto the bridge by a Holloway House staff member, and that a visitor who follows an employee's direction cannot reasonably be said to have "violated" a posted capacity limit. The defense argues that Condition 4 places capacity-compliance responsibility on the visitor regardless of direction given by staff. Whether a staff directive negates the effect of Condition 4 is a central question for the trier of fact.