

Youth commits suicide in New York City homeless shelter

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The tragic death of 16-year-old Jason-Eric Wilson in a homeless shelter in Harlem last week provoked anger as well as sadness among millions who heard of the event.

Jason, who had been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia, killed himself on Monday, August 5 by swallowing every pill he could find in his family's room at the Dawn Hotel, where they had been staying for the past week.

This suicide was far more than a senseless tragedy, however. The circumstances showed that it had been triggered by an appalling combination of bureaucratic callousness and contempt on the part of the political authorities for the poorest sections of the working class. Moreover, the policies that led to Jason's death were themselves the product of a more fundamental crisis of the profit system.

Jason's depression and anxiety first appeared a few years ago, when he was in the seventh grade. He and his 10-year-old sister Lani were being raised by their father, Eric Wilson. Mr. Wilson, now 48, had been diagnosed with leukemia in 1996, and had gone through difficult treatment, including a bone marrow transplant two years ago.

The young man's psychiatric problems, surfacing soon after his father's illness, worsened sharply in the past year, after the family was evicted from its home in Brooklyn and began shuttling between various relatives. This led, just three weeks ago, to their entry into New York's callous and broken-down shelter system. Mr. Wilson and his two children went to the city's Emergency Assistance Unit on July 25, seeking emergency assistance.

For nearly the past decade, all of the city's shelter entry points have been consolidated into this one Dickensian location in the Bronx. Despite court orders insisting that authorities end the practice of forcing families to sleep overnight on the floors of this center, it has continued and increased in recent months, as growing unemployment has produced growing homelessness.

This is the situation that confronted the Wilson family on July 25. They had to wait for many hours to be seen, and were finally transported by bus to a Bronx shelter at 4 o'clock the next morning. By 6 a.m., in an exercise reminiscent of Franz Kafka's fiction, they had been sent back to the Emergency Assistance Unit (EAU) to reapply on the new day of July 26.

They were among hundreds who had to wait at the EAU. Fire safety regulations limit the number inside the unit to 330, and no one is supposed to spend the night at this location. According to the city's own records, however, 966 people waited at the EAU on

August 5, and this number included 139 families, with 196 children, who stayed overnight and tried to sleep on floors or benches.

Mr. Wilson and his two children wound up spending two days and one night at the EAU, before they were sent to the Harlem shelter hotel where they were housed for the next 10 days. Their abuse at the hands of the shelter system was far from over, however. Their stay at the shelter was "conditional," while the city's Department of Homeless Services investigated whether they were truly homeless.

Meanwhile, Mr. Wilson applied for food stamps at a welfare center on July 30. He has been unable to work since his bone marrow transplant. The food stamp request was turned down, however, with the notation by a caseworker, "Eligibility could not be determined without additional documentation." The authorities demanded that Mr. Wilson produce his children's birth certificates as well as proof that he had legal custody. These documents had been lost when they were evicted from their home.

On the night of August 4, a Sunday, the family had to report to the EAU, where they were given a deadline of 5:30 p.m. the following day to produce the necessary documents or else lose their current shelter, inadequate as it was, and return to the degrading conditions at the Bronx EAU.

On August 5, the family scurried from one office to another, seeking duplicate Social Security cards for the children and court records showing that Mr. Wilson had been granted custody of Jason and Lani nine years earlier. The records could not be retrieved until the following day. According to his father, "Jason panicked. He said, 'Dad, what we going to do?'"

The Legal Aid Society called the Department of Homeless Services to see to it that the family received an extension of time to stay at the Harlem shelter hotel, but Jason, apparently despondent and driven over the edge, was found by his father at 4 p.m. surrounded by empty medicine bottles. An angry and grief-stricken Eric Wilson later said, "My son committed suicide because we were being threatened with being sent back to the EAU.... Jason was terrified of going back there. It's a revolting place. It's humiliating and dehumanizing."

No family should have to face these conditions, but in the Wilsons' case court orders that call for a quick shelter placement for "medically fragile" families were also ignored. The bureaucrats charged with caring for the homeless cannot claim ignorance of the circumstances. The screening form filled out

when the Wilson family went to the EAU on July 25 noted Jason's medical history. Several letters from physicians at the Payne Whitney Clinic were attached to the records, including one from a doctor who warned that the boy's health was worsening because of "environmental instability, including threats of homelessness and poverty."

The final assault on this family came when it took 38 minutes for an ambulance to arrive at the hotel. Records show that Mr. Wilson called the 911 emergency phone number frantically at 4:13 p.m. At first the call was given a low priority, but another call two minutes later spelling out the emergency did not lead to any upgrading. The ambulance did not arrive until 4:51. By that time Mr. Wilson had managed to get another ambulance, which took Jason to Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, arriving at 4:45. By then it was too late.

When the death of Jason was reported last week, New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg issued expressions of regret and vague expressions of responsibility. "We as a society clearly fell down," said the mayor. "There's no question about that. The question is, what can be do to keep it from happening again?"

The media, before quickly dropping this story, tried its hand at damage control by making it sound as though the mayor were leading a crusade for social justice. "Bloomberg says city failed suicide teen," headlined the *Daily News*. The *New York Times* announced, "Mayor Wants Investigation into Homeless Boy's Death." The mayor wanted to find out why it took the ambulance 38 minutes to arrive, and whether better coordination between social service agencies could have averted the tragedy.

Bloomberg's reference to society is purposely vague. Society is divided into antagonistic social classes. It is not the working class that is responsible for the death of Jason-Eric Wilson, but the ruling elite and its political representatives who have consistently attacked the working class majority, and especially its most vulnerable sections. In the case of Bloomberg, he combines the roles of full-fledged billionaire and political representative of the billionaires.

Preventing deaths like that of Jason-Eric Wilson means putting an end to the circumstances that clearly produced it. Far from homelessness and poverty being genuinely addressed in the boom years of the 1990s, they persisted and are now heading upward to even higher levels.

By way of explanation for its continued disobedience of court orders that the homeless not be forced to sleep on floors and benches, officials speak of an "unprecedented demand" for emergency shelter. More than 8,000 families, with 14,700 children, were given emergency shelter on an average night in the past month, compared to figures of 6,252 families with 11,594 children in July 2001. The 2001 figure itself surpassed previous peak levels of the early 1990s. Official unemployment has only risen modestly in the current economic crisis, however. A "double dip" recession, considered increasingly likely, would create far worse conditions.

Mayor Bloomberg, however, in the midst of a budget crisis that is growing daily from its current level of a gap of more than \$5 billion, has ruled out any increases in corporate or income taxes, instead opting for an increase in the city's cigarette tax that will

disproportionately affect the poor. The mayor, along with all of the major Democrats in city, state and federal government, also backs the cuts in welfare eligibility and the conscious efforts to discourage the utilization of social services by forcing applicants for emergency shelter and other public assistance to endure interminable delays and intolerable conditions. City Hall has no plans for the tens of thousands of units of affordable housing which would be required to meet minimum needs, and no plans for an expansion of social services.

Attorneys for the Legal Aid Society are now seeking to hold the Bloomberg administration in contempt of court for failing to put an end to the homeless sleeping on floors and benches in the Emergency Assistance Unit. An affidavit by Dr. Ellen F. Crain, a pediatrician at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, filed in connection with this litigation, states that "the unbearably crowded and unsanitary conditions at the EAU office are having devastating impacts on the health of the families there" and that if such conditions were found in a day care center "the facility would be shut down immediately upon inspection by health officials."

There is something charade-like in the current legal proceedings, however. The court case originated almost a decade ago. This litigation began during the administration of David Dinkins, continued through the two terms of Rudolph Giuliani and now continues with Bloomberg. A deputy mayor under Dinkins was in fact found guilty of contempt and ordered to stay at the Emergency Assistance Unit himself. The city appealed, saying it should be excused for violating court orders because it had tried to comply with them! By the time the state's Court of Appeals unanimously upheld the lower court ruling, in 1994, the deputy mayor was out of office so the symbolic punishment never even took place.

While the legal proceedings continue, Jason's life has been snuffed out. According to news reports, after his death Jason's backpack was found filled with books like "Careers in Medicine" and "How to Survive Nursing School," and novels about boys who overcame adversity. His father said Jason wanted to become a psychiatric nurse.

It should be obvious that it will take far more than court proceedings, even if they provide some slight political embarrassment for the current occupants of City Hall, to change the conditions that led to this tragic death. Only an independent political movement of the working class, in opposition to the entire political establishment and the ruling elite that it serves, can assure that the most elemental rights of youth like Jason-Eric Wilson are respected.



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