

Inquest continues into death of mentally ill Milwaukee County Jail inmate denied water for seven days

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29 April 2017

The Milwaukee District Attorney's Office began a week-long inquest Monday into the death of Milwaukee County Jail inmate Terrill Thomas, 38, who died from dehydration seven days after officers at the jail shut off the water supply to his cell.

Thomas was arrested on April 14 of last year for shooting a man in front of his family house and later firing a gun inside Potawatomi Casino in Milwaukee. Thomas had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and his family reported that he was experiencing a severe mental breakdown at the time.

In custody, Thomas was placed in an isolation cell where he appeared to be behaving erratically and experiencing a significant amount of distress. Milwaukee County Jail officers turned off the water supply to Thomas' isolation cell after he reportedly flooded his previous cell by stuffing his mattress into the cell's toilet.

In addition to not having access to water, Thomas was deprived of access to a mattress, blanket or pillow in his isolation cell, and the cell's toilet could not be flushed due to the water supply being shut off. The water supply to Thomas's cell was never turned back on, and he was discovered dead from dehydration.

Thomas had also not eaten over the week he was denied access to water in his cell, losing 30 pounds in 7 days. His meals were not served with water and he refused to eat the "Nutraloaf," a brick-like loaf served in jails that is deliberately made to be unpleasant to consume. Nutraloaf has been banned in New York and California correctional facilities.

The lawyer representing Thomas's estate, Erik Heipt, said the state of his mental health was so severe that it rendered him unable to communicate his situation or

advocate for himself. Heipt contended further that other Milwaukee County Jail inmates had told correction officers that Thomas was in dire need of water.

The Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office ruled his death a homicide, but no charges were initially brought against any of the officers overseeing Thomas. Following the inquest, expected to conclude next week, a jury and the Milwaukee district attorney will decide whether to recommend that charges be brought against the officers who oversaw Thomas's torture and death.

Prosecutors also claim that a Milwaukee jail commander had not revealed the existence of a surveillance video showing the guard shutting off the water supply. Nor was the entire video ordered to be preserved and its existence was not mentioned to investigators for over a year after the death.

During the first week of the inquest, the three officers involved in shutting off the water to Thomas's cell gave conflicting testimony about who was or was not notified and in charge of documenting the water shutoff, and who was to blame for the inmate's death. One of the officers involved in Thomas's death invoked his Fifth Amendment rights to avoid giving testimony.

Heipt has stated that following the inquest he intends to file a federal civil rights case on behalf of Thomas's estate. One of Thomas's surviving children has already filed a separate suit against Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke Jr, who oversees the jail.

Last Monday, Heipt spoke of Thomas's death as an example of the warehousing and torment of vulnerable sections of the mentally ill in jails, instead of providing them with necessary treatment. "He (Thomas) needed

mental health treatment,” said Heipt, “but instead of the jail treating his very serious mental health needs, they responded by punishing him for acting out... They treated his mental illness as a behavioral problem and disciplined him.”

Heipt also compared jail deaths like Thomas’s to the police killings and brutality caught on camera over the past several years.

Inmates are particularly vulnerable to abuse at the hands of the authorities because they are largely invisible to the public and their abuse and even deaths are undocumented and difficult for inmates or their families to investigate.

“That type of evidence [the recorded video] doesn’t always exist in jail-related deaths, and so the people are often not demanding the same level of accountability,” Heipt said. “These things are often poorly investigated and get swept under the rug, and the citizens don’t even know it’s happening.”

Terrill Thomas is one of four people who died in the Milwaukee County Jail over a six-month period in 2016 under the tenure of Sheriff Clarke.

On August 28, 2016, Kristina A. Fiebrink, 38, was found dead in her cell after being arrested four days earlier. She had been struggling with heroin addiction. Fiebrink’s cellmate Elisha Johnson stated in a November 2016 interview with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that Fiebrink had been screaming and hallucinating due to the effects of heroin detoxification, saying “the devil was in her cell and trying to choke her.” She received no help from Milwaukee County Jail employees.

On October 28, 2016, Michael Madden, 29, died in the Milwaukee County Jail. Madden suffered from pre-existing valvular heart disease that was known to his jailers. Madden’s jailmates stated last November that they had attempted to get help from jail employees after he said he was unable to breathe and his head hurt, but Madden became unresponsive before personnel responded.

In July 2016, Shade Swayzer, 30, was incarcerated in the Milwaukee County Jail while she was nine months pregnant. When her water broke and she went into labor in her cell, she begged for help from her jailers, who laughed at her and ignored her pleas. Her newborn baby was pronounced dead later in the day.

Swayzer insists that her baby cried profusely and

breastfed before dying, but the private company contracted to perform medical care for inmates said publicly the baby was stillborn. The Milwaukee County Sheriff’s Office reported that Swayzer never asked for help or informed corrections officers at the jail that she was going into labor.

Sheriff Clarke, a fascistic figure who publicly supported Donald Trump’s election campaign and spoke at the Republican National Convention, has made only one public comment on Thomas’ death, complaining that journalists have not adequately reported on the prisoner’s health prior to his being jailed or the seriousness of the crimes he committed. He has disregarded the fact that neither of these factors contributed to his death and that he was suffering from serious mental illness.

In January it came to light that Clarke had made bullying threats to the Milwaukee County chief medical examiner after the examiner released information about two of the four inmates who had died from neglect in the county jail in 2016.

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker said in a statement earlier this week, following calls for Clarke to be removed from his position due to deaths in the jail he supervises, that he would not fire the sheriff. “Ultimately, the decision about the sheriff is left up to the voters; that’s a constitutional office,” the governor stated.

On Friday, Washington DC sources revealed to the Politico web site that Clarke is being considered for a senior position in the Trump administration, that of assistant secretary for the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Partnership and Engagement, which coordinates with state and local law enforcement.



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