

The fifth death in two years

Eighteen-year-old found hanged in northern Wisconsin jail

Jacob Crosse
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Trequelle “Tre” Vann-Marcouex, 18, was found hanged in a Wood County Jail cell, in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, on Sunday, August 19. The teen was transported to a Marathon County hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Vann-Marcouex, who turned 18 in April, had played football and wrestled for Wisconsin Rapids High School. He is the fifth inmate of Wood County Jail apparently driven to suicide in the last two years.

Two inmates died at the jail in December 2017. A 28-year-old woman was found hanging in the shower on December 22; she was in custody for a 45-day probation hold for retail theft. A 35-year-old male was found dead in his cell less than a week later on December 26.

Vann-Marcouex had appeared before Wood County Circuit Judge Todd P. Wolf for a preliminary court hearing on August 15 in regard to an alleged armed robbery, without a lawyer present to represent him. The Assistance of Counsel Clause in the Sixth Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of the accused to an attorney.

He had been arrested and charged with armed robbery, burglary and child abuse, charges which together carried a maximum of 65 years in prison. He qualified for a public defender which was to be assigned by the State Public Defender’s Office (SPD), as the teen was considered “low income.”

According to transcripts published by *Urban Milwaukee*, Judge Wolf was made aware that Vann-Marcouex didn’t have representation by Assistant District Attorney Leigh Neville-Neil before and during the hearing. Neville-Neil stated to the court that Vann-Marcouex, “...qualified for a public defender. He has

been calling them repeatedly and has not been assigned counsel yet, just so the Court’s aware.” This didn’t deter the judge from continuing with the proceedings, even though the Judge was obligated, at this time, to appoint counsel for the defendant.

In cases where the State cannot provide a public defender, the County is obligated to provide money for a defense attorney. Court transcripts reveal Vann-Marcouex informed Judge Wolf that he had been in contact with SPD every day since his internment 11 days prior but had yet to be assigned a lawyer.

Judge Wolf interrupted Vann-Marcouex repeatedly throughout the brief 26 minute hearing. Wolf repeatedly reminded Vann-Marcouex that he would do what was most favorable, “for the State,” and that anything that Vann-Marcouex said would be, “taken down and could be used against you.”

Vann-Marcouex, maintaining his innocence throughout the preliminary hearing, tried to ascertain why an attorney had not been assigned to represent him. “I have been calling the Public Defender’s Office every single day, and they make it—I get on the phone with them, and they’d laugh. When I called them yesterday and I asked them how is it I don’t have a public defender and I got my court in less than 24 hours, and she is, like, ‘right.’ How is that an answer, ‘right?’ How is that an answer?”

Judge Wolf, abdicating his responsibility for the violation of the young man’s democratic rights, responded, “Well, you have to deal with them on that. I can only do the hearings that are before me, and that’s where I am at, so—all right? That will be it. He will be remanded back to the custody of the jail.”

It was in that custody that Vann-Marcouex apparently

hanged himself.

SPD spokesman Randy Kraft told *Urban Milwaukee* that in Vann-Marcoux's case, a "conflict of interest" had prevented his office from assigning an attorney for the teenage defendant. This "conflict of interest" meant the SPD had to hire a private attorney to represent the teen.

SPD has an excessive workload and is forced to hire private attorneys regularly. This can be difficult to accomplish, as by law, the state of Wisconsin can only pay an attorney \$40 an hour, the lowest in the nation, to represent working class or low income defendants. There is also a dearth of attorneys available in rural areas, such as Wood and Marathon counties.

The State Supreme Court rejected a proposed raise to the public defender's hourly rate earlier this year. One of the petitioners on behalf of SPD, attorney John Birdsall, noted in his appeal to the court that the hourly rate had remained "virtually unchanged for 40 years." Birdsall further remarked that a shortage of lawyers coupled with the over 58,000 cases that are handled by SPD annually will soon "overwhelm a highly stressed system." Birdsall also noted that the cost to increase the hourly rate would, "literally be a fraction of one percent of the state budget."

As usual, there is no money to give public defenders raises, or for any other programs that benefit the working class. Funds flow freely, however, to expand and militarize the police and the prison industrial complex.

Earlier this year, the Dane County Board of Supervisors agreed to borrow \$76 million to upgrade and "consolidate" the Dane County Jail. The total cost of the project will be over \$108 million over 20 years. Part of the marketing campaign being sold to the working class is that this will improve "safety" for inmates housed at the jail.

Safety concerns have plagued the jail recently. In August 2017, five different inmates attempted to hang themselves, and by November 2017 that number had climbed to 8, leading Dane County Sheriff David Mahoney to remark on the "unprecedented" amount of attempts, while advocating for increased funding for the jail renovation project. On September 3, 56 year old father, Brian Keith Rocca, was found dead hanging in his Dane County cell. He had been imprisoned at the facility since April 2018.

These tragic and preventable deaths reflect an upward trend in suicides throughout the United States' overcrowded, backlogged and brutal jail and prison system. According to the Bureau of Justice, suicides have spiked since 2013, with 38 in 100,000 committing suicide while in custody. This rate is 3 times more than in the general population. Aside from illness, suicide remain the highest cause of death while incarcerated in the United States.



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