

Homeless Detroit mother could still be scapegoated for deaths of her children

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On Wednesday, the Detroit Police Department (DPD) submitted the results of its investigation to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office concerning the February 10 deaths of two children who were sheltering with their homeless family in a van parked in a downtown casino garage.

It is possible that Prosecutor Kim Worthy could file charges. Sections of the Detroit media, led by Fox News, have been pressing to scapegoat 29-year-old Tateona Williams for the tragic deaths, which were caused by poverty and official neglect by city authorities. Workers and youth should oppose any attempts to bring charges against Williams or any member of the family.

The DPD's submission to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office set into motion a request for a warrant in connection to the deaths of 9-year-old Darnell Currie Jr. and 2-year-old A'Millah Currie.

On the night of their deaths, temperatures in the city dropped down to 12°F. Tateona, her mother and five children had been living in a 2002 Chrysler Town & Country van for three months. They would often park in casino garages to have access to public restrooms.

Initially, police thought the two children died of hypothermia, but a March 5 autopsy report confirmed that the cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning. Apparently, fumes from the 23-year-old vehicle seeped into the van while the family was sleeping.

When Tateona found Darnell unresponsive, she had a friend who had come to assist in the early morning hours, drive her and the child to the hospital. During that time it was discovered that the 2-year-old had stopped breathing, too.

After the Detroit media reported that police had filed a request for a warrant from the prosecutor's office, police Chief Todd Bettison issued a statement, saying, "I want to clarify that the Detroit Police Department has completed its investigation into the deaths of the children, and the findings have been submitted to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office for review. We have not requested charges against any family member."

Bettison added, "Any charging decisions will be made solely by the Prosecutor's Office." As of this writing, no information has been made public regarding what charges, if any, are under consideration.

After the tragedy, Williams repeatedly made clear she did everything she could to keep her family safe. "I asked everybody for help. I called out of state, I called cities I didn't know, I called cities people asked me to call. I even asked Detroit—I've been on CAM (the city's housing service) list for the longest." She added, "Everybody now wants to help after I lost two kids? ... It took my two kids to die for you to help me? It's too late..."

Any suggestion that the mother, an unemployed medical assistant, might face charges is outrageous. Documentation reveals that Williams' pleas for housing and shelter were repeatedly ignored by city officials.

A crime has certainly been committed, but not by Tateona Williams. The entire political establishment—both the Democratic and Republican parties, from the city and state to the federal government—are responsible for social murder.

Hours after news broke about the deaths, Detroit's Democratic mayor, Mike Duggan, held a press conference to quell public anger. He falsely claimed the city had adequate resources to assist those in need. He had to admit, however, that Williams had repeatedly contacted the city's homeless and housing agencies, including in November 2024, but her pleas were ignored.

According to data from the Coordinated Assessment Model (CAM), families spent an average of 133 days on a shelter placement waitlist, highlighting the severe shortage of space the city has failed to address. Despite this, the mayor continued to insinuate that Williams was at fault, stating, "The family never called back for service."

The Biden administration is also implicated in the preventable deaths of the children. In December 2022, Williams reached out to the COVID Emergency Rental Assistance (CERA) program. The federally funded initiative ended June 30, 2022, when Biden allowed it to expire. The end of CERA, along with the expiration of the eviction moratorium, contributed to a sharp rise in homelessness. According to Point In Time (PIT) data, homelessness in the US doubled during the Biden administration.

The average wage that Tateona Williams would earn as a Certified Nursing Assistant in Michigan is only \$18.72 an hour. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the

average “housing wage” required to afford a modest two-bedroom rental home in the US is \$32.11 per hour. Nearly 52 million American workers earn less than \$15 an hour.

The enormous social inequality and poverty resulting from the vast transfer of wealth to billionaire oligarchs under Biden is only accelerating under Trump. His billionaire axe man, Elon Musk, has called homelessness a hoax and said NGOs inflate the numbers of people living on the streets in order to get more government funding.

In the meantime, millions of people are one or two paychecks away from homelessness. This has led to an outpouring of public support for Tateona Williams, making it difficult for authorities and the media to criminalize her.

A GoFundMe campaign set up to support Williams raised more than \$52,000 in less than two weeks after the deaths. Hundreds of residents attended the children’s funeral on February 19, including students, teachers and football mates of Darnell Jr. from the Ecorse Public School system.

In order to fend off public criticism, the City of Detroit and the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries donated a home to Williams’ family for their lifetime. Mayor Duggan, who is overseeing a city plagued by staggering levels of social inequality, wants to sweep the case under the rug so it will not interfere with his campaign for governor next year.

However, the danger remains that Tateona or one of her family members could be framed up in the future. There is a long and sordid history of the Democratic Party establishment and corporate media falsely prosecuting and blaming parents involved in such tragic events.

In February 1993, a devastating fire destroyed the home of Shereese Williams and Leroy Lyons, an unemployed couple living on Mack Avenue on Detroit’s eastside. Lyons, believing his water pipes had frozen, attempted to thaw them with a burning roll of newspapers. Smoldering embers later ignited and the home was engulfed in flames, killing the couple’s seven children.

In fact, the city had shut off water to the impoverished family without informing them. To divert attention from their responsibility, city officials, aided by screaming newspaper headlines declaring that the children were “home alone,” filed criminal charges against the parents who were out of the house collecting scrap metal for money.

The Workers League, the predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party, waged a powerful campaign to expose widespread shutoffs by the city water department and electric and gas utilities, along with the social catastrophe caused by decades of plant closures and deindustrialization—both of which were aided and abetted by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy. The campaign substantially shifted public opinion, and the parents were acquitted by a Detroit jury.

In 2010, city officials and the media drummed up a campaign against Sylvia Young, a 30-year-old mother who lost her three children in another fire caused by utility shutoffs. Treated like a

criminal by police and the news media, which spread the slander that she had been at a “party store” at the time of the fire, Young was dragged into court, charged with “neglect” and deprived of the custody of her surviving children.

The frame-up collapsed, however, when evidence emerged that she had pleaded with a DTE representative not to shut off her electricity just hours before the fire and that she had been out shopping for a space heater when the blaze began.

Whether charges are filed against Tateona Williams will ultimately be a political decision. The Democratic Party establishment is sitting on a social powder keg, which could be ignited by tragedies like this, exposing the empty rhetoric about the “turnaround” of Detroit since the 2013-14 bankruptcy. The restructuring of the city has mainly benefited real estate billionaires like Dan Gilbert while working class families struggle with affordable housing prices, deteriorating infrastructure and austerity.

This will only get worse as Trump accelerates his social counterrevolution, gutting essential programs that tens of millions depend on, like Medicaid, Social Security and Medicare, along with public education. Whatever their tepid protests, the Democrats are complicit in these attacks and will be put in charge of implementing massive social service cuts in cities like Detroit.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to oppose any attempt to scapegoat the poor for tragedies caused by capitalism. We call for the formation of rank-and-file committees in factories, schools, hospitals, and neighborhoods, free from union bureaucracies and the two capitalist parties, to mobilize workers in collective action, including mass protests, demonstrations, and strikes.

These committees should demand the provision of emergency housing for the homeless, and the use of eminent domain to seize unoccupied office buildings, luxury homes and upscale apartment complexes owned by Gilbert, the Ilitches and other wealthy investors.



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