



The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is the voice of the community on issues related to the quality and responsiveness of mental health and substance abuse disorder services.

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Contact: Mary Neubauer, Co-chair Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force, 414-807-6505

Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force Statement on Inquest into Death of Terrill Thomas At Milwaukee County Jail

The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is profoundly disturbed by the reports of deaths at the Milwaukee County Jail in 2016, involving individuals who seem to have had significant mental health issues. Today, prosecutors are moving forward with an inquest into the death of Terrill Thomas, a man with significant mental health needs, who died of profound dehydration in his Milwaukee County jail cell.

The injustice of this death is further compounded by a statement from Sheriff Clarke to Fox 6 News indicating he does not remember Mr. Thomas by name, and referring to his potential involvement in a shooting at Potawatomi. Nothing justifies the treatment in jail that resulted in his death. People held in custody at our county jail are entitled to be treated in a dignified, humane, and professional manner, regardless of their alleged conduct. Sherriff Clarke has a legal obligation to run his jail in a safe and humane way. His statement shows a troubling lack of acknowledgement of that responsibility.

The full circumstances of the deaths are still unclear, and will hopefully be clarified through the inquest process, but there is strong reason to believe that oversight failures, inadequate training and supervision within the Sheriff's department played a significant role in these deaths, in addition to any errors or omissions attributable to the medical staff. Our community and families need and deserve transparency regarding the management of the jail and the humane treatment of people who are incarcerated there.

To ensure inmate safety as well as prevent the County from being liable for future tragedies, we support an independent and expert audit of all facets of care, including the Sheriff's staff's training in recognizing symptoms of mental illness and as first responders for inmates held in housing areas and typically removed from any direct ongoing contact with any medical staff. While an audit by Milwaukee County Staff is a promising first step, given the scope and gravity of the systemic concerns, we further recommend a National Institute of Corrections (NIC) or similar audit that addresses all facets of the Jail operations, including management of inmates with mental illness and the manner in which the Sheriff's custody staff interacts and supports the medical program and ensuring that inmates are properly screened and monitored by a sufficient number of trained and attentive corrections and medical professionals. The NIC has worked extensively with the Milwaukee criminal justice system and conducted such an audit of the House of Correction in 2008.

We respect that official investigations must be completed. We also recognize that there are situations in which an individual has a health emergency that leads to an untimely death despite the best possible care. But these recent developments point to a crisis requiring the highest level of attention and response. We believe that anything less would ignore the reality that death in custody should be a rare and avoidable event.

In addition, safeguards must be put in place to ensure a broad commitment by the Sheriff's department and all agencies in our criminal justice system to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent recurrence of these events. This commitment must be immediately apparent to everyone in our community. Individuals with serious mental or physical health issues in custody at any local institutions including the Milwaukee County Jail, Milwaukee County House of Correction, Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility, Juvenile Detention or other facilities must receive appropriate care and treatment. This is a minimum standard which we must hold ourselves to as a humane and civilized community. Being in custody should never be something which puts a person at high risk of death or serious medical harm.

The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force was formed in 2004, in response to a crisis in inpatient psychiatric services that exposed major gaps in Milwaukee's system of mental health care. It includes over 40 organizations, and hundreds of individuals, who work collaboratively to identify issues faced by people affected by mental illness, facilitate improvements in services, give consumers and families a strong voice, reduce stigma, and implement recovery principles.