

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/criminal-charges-filed-after-jail-inmate-dies-thirst/>

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03.07.18

Criminal charges have been filed against officers and medical staff in the death of Terrill Thomas, who died after seven straight days locked in a solitary confinement cell in the Milwaukee County Jail with no water.

Mr. Thomas lost 34 pounds more than 10 percent of his body weight in the eight days he spent in the jail. Other people in cells near him said he begged for water in the days before he died. An autopsy showed that the 38-year-old died on April 24, 2016, of profound dehydration. The Milwaukee County medical examiner ruled his death a homicide.

After an inquest into Mr. Thomas's death, a Milwaukee County jury unanimously recommended criminal charges against seven staff members at the jail.

In February, prosecutors charged former jail administrator Major Nancy Evans with felony misconduct and one misdemeanor charge of obstruction, and charged Lieutenant Kashka Meadors and corrections officer James Ramsey-Guy with felony neglect. The criminal complaint alleges that Meadors ordered the water in Mr. Thomas's cell to be shut off as punishment (for flooding or trying to flood a different cell) and Ramsey-Guy shut off the water as ordered, but did not log it or tell other officers the water was off, and during the investigation into the death, Evans lied to investigators about surveillance video showing the water being shut off and failed to preserve that footage.

Prosecutors assert that jail staff knew Mr. Thomas suffered from bipolar disorder. In a court filing last month, the district attorney wrote:

Inmates are at the mercy of their jailors for basic life-sustaining necessities like water, food, and medical care. When a mentally ill inmate, like Mr. Thomas, is locked in solitary confinement without access to water, his life is totally in his jailors' hands. The law must strictly require jailors to safeguard lives which are so completely entrusted to their care. Stupidity, thoughtlessness, indifference, and incompetence are not morally sufficient excuses nor valid legal defenses.

The district attorneys' office also filed criminal charges against the jail's medical provider, Armor Correctional Health Services Inc., which prosecutors say engaged in a pattern and practice of intentionally falsifying entries in inmate patient health care records. According to the criminal complaint, Armor personnel made false entries in Mr. Thomas's patient health care record, stating that they checked on him even fabricating blood pressure and pulse readings when video surveillance shows they either walked by his cell without stopping or never appeared at his cell at all. The district attorneys' office added that staffers may have identified Mr. Thomas's fatal medical distress had they actually performed the medical assessments they said they did.

Mr. Thomas is one of [four people who died](#) in the Milwaukee County Jail, with a maximum capacity of 960 people, between April and October 2016. A medical monitors report found that Kristina Fiebrink, who died in August, may have been going through withdrawal but her medical visit was canceled because she had been evaluated during a prior admission, and in July, a newborn infant died after being delivered by a mentally ill woman without jail staff noticing. In October, 29-year-old Michael Madden died after he suffered a seizure and lost consciousness; an incarcerated person reported that a corrections officer who thought Mr. Madden was faking the seizure and unconsciousness lifted him up and then dropped him, causing him to fall backwards and hit his head.

At the time of these deaths, the jail was run by Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, a prominent Trump supporter and critic of the Black Lives Matter movement who said last May that he was in line for a position in the Department of Homeland Security, but later rescinded his acceptance of the post. He resigned from his position as Milwaukee County Sheriff last August.

Mr. Thomas's death was one of [more than 800 deaths in jails and police lockups](#) that HuffPost documented in the year following Sandra Bland's death on July 13, 2015. As HuffPost reported:

Deaths inside American jails frequently go unnoticed, sometimes even unrecorded. Unlike prisons, jails hold people for only short periods—about 21 days on average—and many of their inmates have not been convicted of a crime.

The investigation found that Black people are more likely to die in jail because they are more likely to be arrested than any other racial group. African Americans comprise 13 percent of the United States population and, on average, 32 percent of people who died in jail between 2000 and 2013, according to federal data.

Terrill Thomas died after 7 straight days locked in a solitary confinement cell in the Milwaukee County Jail with no water.

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