

Sen. Larson: Legislators Introduce the Jail Death Transparency Act

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Madison, WI – The following remarks were made by Senator Larson, Senator Risser, Representative Crowley, and Representative Bowen regarding the Jail Death Transparency Act.

In 2014, the State Legislature passed an accountability and transparency measure to ensure justice for individuals killed by law enforcement officers. Unfortunately, current law is only applicable to law enforcement officers and does not hold correctional officers in city, county, and state correctional facilities to the same investigatory standards. This legislation would extend the current, bipartisan, transparency standards to correction officer-involved deaths.

“When a death occurs within a system or institution, the people of Wisconsin deserve to know that a fair investigation will follow,” said Rep. David Bowen, the ranking Democratic member of the Assembly’s Corrections Committee. “This legislation will give that assurance.”

Rep. Crowley stated, “Unfortunately, many people today have a distrust for the criminal justice system and the use of internal investigations for deaths that occur while in custody can be viewed as a way to cover up mistakes or potential criminal neglect by correctional officers. The Jail Death Transparency Act will increase trust from grieving families and the public by extending the same transparency standards that apply to law enforcement deaths to correctional officers.”

It is crucial that the public has confidence that an appropriate investigation is pursued for inmate deaths across the state. Sen. Risser stated that, “Expanding current law on independent investigations in cases of inmate death is in the best public interest and will increase the public confidence in our correctional system.”

Currently, deaths occurring in our jailing facilities have been handled internally by correctional facilities 40% of time, this legislation establishes a clear standard of transparency after an inmate’s death.

Senator Larson added, “These investigations can serve as a way to assess policies and procedures at facilities and improve mental health screenings, expose poor medical care and response times, as well as root out ineffective or over-zealous correctional officers. It is our intent to provide clear standards across the state regarding the investigation of jail deaths as a way to provide a level of transparency for the public. We hope that this nonpartisan legislation will gain traction and serve as a tool to continue to move Wisconsin forward.”