

Date: May 3, 2017 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DRW Statement on Findings of Inquest Into Death of Terrill Thomas at Milwaukee County Jail

Disability Rights Wisconsin is profoundly concerned about the inhumane treatment of individuals with mental illness and other disabilities who are held in the Milwaukee County Jail. Monday's verdict by an inquest jury that probable cause of a crime exists in Terrill Thomas's death by dehydration in the Milwaukee County Jail last year, lends further weight to our demand that the civil rights, health, and welfare of all individuals within the Milwaukee County Jail be attended to and respected.

"Recent statements by the Milwaukee County Sheriff further reinforce our concerns that respect for the civil rights, welfare, and rule of law regarding the treatment of people held in the jail is not expected, communicated, or enforced. The law demands that individuals be afforded a reasonable standard of care – not isolation, deprivation, and dehydration," stated Disability Rights Wisconsin Executive Director Daniel Idzikowski.

Although promising efforts to improve screening, diversion, and treatment have the support of most members of the criminal justice system in Milwaukee County, the jail remains a place of detention for far too many individuals whose primary "offense" is mental illness. As the Protection and Advocacy system for people with mental illness in Wisconsin, we call upon the Sheriff and other County leadership to institute immediate reforms to ensure those held in jail are not subject to abuse, neglect, or cruelty and have access to necessary medical and mental health treatment. Given the gravity of the concerns, we further recommend an independent and comprehensive audit of staffing at the jail, and of procedures for inmates with mental illness and in detention.

The death of Mr. Thomas, as well as the 2016 deaths of several other inmates with mental illness, should serve as a warning that our community must act to decrease the growing number of people with mental illness in the criminal justice system. Roughly a third of the jail population is on psychotropic medication, and additional inmates have significant untreated mental health needs. Jail is not a treatment facility. We must expedite initiatives, such as the MacArthur Safety and Justice Challenge, to divert individuals with mental health issues to alternatives that will help prevent them from cycling in and out of Milwaukee's criminal justice system.

Disability Rights Wisconsin will continue to pursue its investigation into the conditions and treatment of individuals with disabilities and mental illness detained in the Milwaukee County jail, as well as advancing policies to divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system and connect them with treatment and other services.

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