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## THE REGION | CITY SUBURBS SOUTH JERSEY

# Family sues over death of an inmate at Montco jail

Suit says Terrence Taylor, 23, was left unsupervised in a medical wing in 2017 and died of a heart ailment.

By Vinny Vella  
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In October 2017, Terrence Taylor was just six weeks away from freedom. He was nearing the end of a jail sentence in Montgomery County for violating probation in a drug case when he dislocated his shoulder, an injury

he first sustained years earlier in high school.

He was treated at a local hospital and given medication for the pain. On the way back to jail, Taylor was upbeat, according to the corrections officer who drove him. Taylor told the officer he knew he had made mistakes,

but he was looking forward when he was released to getting back to work and providing for his daughter, Serenity.

Once back at the jail, Taylor became sluggish and unresponsive, vomited on himself, and was unable to walk. Five hours later, he was dead.

The county coroner ruled that Taylor, 23, died from an irregular heartbeat caused by an enlarged

heart and aggravated by a form of congenital heart disease. The county investigated his death, a standard procedure for any inmate who dies, but didn't publicly announce any discipline or policy changes.

His family has filed a lawsuit in federal court, alleging that guards at the jail abandoned Taylor during what was clearly a medical emergency, and then

tried to hide their mistake by altering internal records.

The family's lawyer, Colin Burke, says the use of a defibrillator and proper medical care could have saved Taylor's life.

But surveillance footage and internal reports obtained by the lawyer and reviewed by The Inquirer show that Taylor was left alone in a cell in the prison's

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## Lawsuit

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medical wing for hours.

"Terrence Taylor was on work release: He would have been out of prison in six weeks and on with his life. And, instead, he's dead and this beautiful little girl is now fatherless, just because they didn't help him," said Burke, of the Center City firm Kline & Specter. "They just didn't do the most basic thing. Just give him some help, and get him to a hospital."

Taylor's family is seeking financial damages from the county and PrimeCare Medical, the company it hired to treat inmates, saying that his death could have been prevented and that the jail staff engaged in "criminal conduct" by attempting to cover it up.

A spokesperson for the Montgomery County commissioners declined to comment because the lawsuit is pending. In court documents, lawyers for the county said corrections officers did not know Taylor was experiencing a medical emergency, and did not intentionally deny or delay giving him access to care. PrimeCare, too, denied any wrongdoing by its staff members on the day Taylor died.

Prison records that lawyers for Taylor's family obtained through the lawsuit show that corrections officers at the jail left Taylor alone in a cell for nearly three hours, and failed to check on him for more than an hour. They contend that prison policy required such checks every 30 minutes for prisoners housed in the medical wing.

Taylor's family also learned that prison officials initially withheld surveillance footage that recorded him in the medical wing during the final hours of his life, providing the missing footage only after one of Taylor's fellow inmates testified in a deposition about the events leading up to his death.

And they say they learned that an assistant warden at the jail doctored a timeline provided to county officials to make it appear that the guards were checking on Taylor consistently before he died. That assistant has since been fired, but it is unclear whether his firing is related to the case.

Elyse Tesno, Taylor's longtime girlfriend and the mother of his daughter, said no one deserves the treatment he received.

"Terrence was a person. Why did [prison staff] care less about him than somebody else?" she asked during an interview with The Inquirer. "[They] literally let someone die who didn't deserve to die."

After Taylor returned from the hospital for treatment of his shoulder pain, his condition quickly deteriorated, according to county records and surveil-



Elyse Tesno, Taylor's longtime girlfriend and the mother of his daughter, just wants closure, and answers to the questions that their 5-year-old daughter keeps asking about her father. TYGER WILLIAMS / Staff Photographer



Terrence Taylor in a photo with his daughter Serenity. Lawyers for the county said corrections officers did not know he was having a medical emergency.

lance footage from the jail viewed by the Inquirer. Unable to walk, he was wheeled into the medical wing by correctional officers.

There, surveillance footage shows, none of the medical staff thoroughly examined him, and he had only a brief check by the on-call doctor, who left the prison almost immediately afterward. The guards then wheeled Taylor into a cell in the medical wing and left him there, according to the footage.

Later, other inmates on the same wing are seen walking up to Taylor's cell, then trying to get the attention of officers in the nearby security booth.

One inmate said he repeatedly shouted for the officers to help Taylor, and told them he was vomiting, and, eventually,

**“Terrence was a person. Why did [prison staff] care less about him than somebody else? [They] literally let someone die who didn't deserve to die.”**

Elyse Tesno, Terrence Taylor's longtime girlfriend and the mother of his daughter

that he had stopped breathing. That inmate, Richard Pasquarello, said he was told to return to his cell, according to a transcript of his deposition cited in the lawsuit.

After prompting by Pasquarello and others, according to records compiled by jail officials, a guard checked on Taylor and found him unresponsive. He was pronounced dead a short time later.

A county investigation into Taylor's death contained a preliminary timeline showing that guards did not check on him for more than an hour after bringing him there, but the lawsuit says the document was later revised to say, falsely, that they had. In addition, all references to the underlying surveillance video were removed from the finalized timeline.

Former Assistant Warden Mark Murray later said in a deposition that he made the changes, but that in truth, no one checked on Taylor for more than an hour as he was lying unresponsive in his cell.

Asked during the deposition about the altered entries, Murray said he could not explain them. He also said he had removed references to camera footage showing that corrections officers failed to complete their rounds and that inmates had attempted to notify the officers that Taylor was unresponsive.

In an interview with The Inquirer this month, Murray, who no longer works for the county, attributed the discrepancies to

differing accounts in reports he received from corrections officers at the jail.

"When we finally got a chance to get the video, we found the reports we were given were not accurate, and then I documented my new timeline, based on the video that we had," said Murray. "There was no lying on anyone's part. No one was trying to deceive anyone, especially not Terrence Taylor's family."

Murray said he was fired by the county on April 30, and believes it was because of this. A county spokeswoman confirmed that Murray is no longer employed at the jail, but did not provide further details.

As the civil case moves forward, Taylor's family said they are left with grief and anger, knowing he was left to die alone. Tesno, Taylor's girlfriend, just wants closure, and answers to the questions their 5-year-old daughter keeps asking about her father.

"I lost my dad in 2016, so I know how Serenity is going to feel when she's old enough to understand it," Tesno said. "Her dad should've been here today, her dad should be there when she graduates, her dad should literally be there with every single milestone she reaches, because he wanted to be there."

"And he didn't get that chance, because somebody else wanted to be careless."

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