ACLU

ACLU RAISES CONCERNS OVER PSYCHIATR SUICIDE AT ORLEANS PARISH PRISON

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NEW ORLEANS- At a hearing tomorrow before U.S. Magistrate Judge Alma L. Chasez, the American Civil Liberties Union will argue for reconsideration of the court's dismissal of mental health care issues from its oversight at the Orleans Parish Prison, following the apparent suicide of a 34-year-old man placed in four-point restraints.

On April 4, 2004, Matthew Bonnette reportedly hanged himself with a leather belt while under suicide watch and confined in a device that latched his wrists to a waist belt and locked his ankles in cuffs for at least eight hours.

The complete story of how and why Matthew Bonnette died remains a mystery because the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office refuses to produce all the necessary documentation explaining the cause of Mr. Bonnette's death,"" said Elizabeth Alexander, Director of the ACLU's National Prison Project. "Tomorrow's hearing is crucial to getting

the answers we need in order to protect other vulnerable detainees.""

A motion filed by the National Prison Project on Friday calls Bonnette's death the ""result of a catastrophic failure of OPP staff to use proper restraint techniques or monitor his activities and behavior."" The few records the ACLU was able to obtain indicate that Bonnette was never examined by a psychiatrist while at the jail and that apparently no notes were taken concerning his mental status while he was in restraints. Such failures are in violation of a 1991 Court Order in *Hamilton v. Morial that mandated the jail's compliance with mental health care standards outlined by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care.*

"My family is still in shock over Matthew's death,"" said Robert Bonnette, Matthew's father, who plans to attend Wednesday's hearing with his wife. ""My granddaughter has lost a loving father because of ineffective jail policies that have proven fatal.""

Bonnette's death raises serious questions about current and ongoing deficiencies in the jail's suicide prevention practices, and in the use of restraints and seclusion. Three years ago another detainee, Shawn Duncan, also died while held in restraints under suicide watch. Duncan died of dehydration on August 10, 2001 after he had been strapped in five-point restraints for 42 hours. The tragic circumstances surrounding his death were raised in a 2002 hearing, but the court denied an ACLU request that the existing restraint policy be invalidated. Subsequently, Sheriff William C. Hunter has admitted that the failure to have a psychiatrist on duty caused Duncan's death.

Elizabeth Alexander, director of the ACLU's National Prison Project, will argue at tomorrow's hearing on behalf of the Plaintiffs, detainees and prisoners housed at the Orleans Parish Prison. They are also represented by Eric Balaban of the ACLU National Prison Project and Loyola Law Professor William P. Quigley.

The ACLU's motion in the case is online at /node/35172

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