Orleans Parish Prison inmate dies, was hospitalized chronic condition

Diana Samuels, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune
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Calvin Thomas.jpg

Calvin Thomas, also known as Calvin Deal, was booked with armed robbery in connection with an Aug. 31 armed robbery at a Magazine Street Circle K.

(Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office)

An Orleans Parish Prison inmate who was hospitalized on Thursday (Nov. 12) for a chronic medical condition died on Sunday morning, according to the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office.

Calvin Deal, 34, had been in prison since Sept. 24 and was accused of robbing a Circle K convenience store on the 6000 block of Magazine Street.

Officials said the cause of Deal's death has not been confirmed but he had been taken to University Medical Center for a chronic medical condition. He died at the hospital at about 11 a.m. Sunday.

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Inmate who died in OPP complained staff 'not taking his sickness seriously,' sister says

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Le'Mona Deal's older brother called her Sunday (Nov. 15) to tell her their little brother was dead.

Calvin Thomas, 34, an inmate at Orleans Parish Prison awaiting trial on an armed robbery charge, had lived his whole life with sickle cell disease, Le'Mona Deal said. He'd been to the hospital more times than she could count for what she called a "sickle cell crisis," but he always came out of it.

Her family learned Sunday that Thomas, who also went by Calvin Deal, had been in the hospital for some time before he was pronounced dead Sunday. The family didn't know he was hospitalized until a sheriff's deputy knocked on her mother's door to tell her Thomas had died.

A media release sent Sunday by Orleans Parish Sheriff Marlin Gusman's office said Thomas had been at the hospital since Thursday. The release said Thomas suffered from a chronic medical condition.

Le'Mona Deal could accept if her brother, a year younger than she, died from his disease, if it was ultimately proven, she said. However, she said, "it's hard to

accept that Calvin lived 34 years free, out of the prison system and not once had an issue with getting care," she said.

Orleans Parish Coroner Dr. Jeffrey Rouse Wednesday released preliminary autopsy results in Thomas's death. The results revealed Thomas had "bilateral pneumonia, bilateral pleural effusions, a thickened heart wall, and a grossly enlarged spleen," the release says. It says those problems were "consistent with the history that Mr. Thomas suffered from sickle cell."

Mary Hulihan, an epidemiologist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said individuals don't die directly from sickle cell disease. Those suffering from the disease do, however, often die of organ failure. Because the disease, which is a blood disorder, is chronic, it can deteriorate organs over time.

The effect of sickle cell on mortality "varies considerably," she said, but the average life span lasts until patients' mid-40s, a 20-to 30-year reduction from the general population.

LeMona Deal fears her brother might have had more years left to live had he not been possibly been neglected at the jail facility.

"He has complained about they're not taking his sickness seriously," Le'Mona Deal said, referring to jail officials. "It seems to me ... they didn't come and treat him in a timely fashion. I'm not sure, but I'm worried that's what happened."

Her and Thomas's brother Frank Deal, 38, who also suffers from sickle cell disease, was more certain.

"You should not have a spleen five times the way it's supposed to be," he said, referring to what he learned from the coroner's report. "That means neglect."

Sheriff's office spokesman Morgan Wampold referred to the coroner's statement in response to questions about Thomas's death.

Hulihan said patients taking medicine to treat sickle cell disease must take it for an extended period of time, or the benefit decreases.

Prior concerns about Thomas's treatment

Thomas told Le'Mona Deal the last time they spoke Oct. 31 that he was receiving folic acid, but not some of his other medications, she said.

Last month, another inmate called Le'Mona Deal at Thomas's request to tell her Thomas had chest pains and was possibly having a sickle cell crisis. She said she called the jail and asked for someone to check on him. The person she spoke to -- she said she didn't know the employee's name -- said someone would look into it. But no one contacted her again to say if he was OK.

Also in the autopsy report, Rouse said there was "no evidence" of trauma.

Le'Mona Deal wonders, however, if injuries her brother sustained a few weeks ago in a fight with other inmates could have led to an infection, which could be exacerbated by his disease.

Le'Mona Deal heard from other family members that Thomas got into a fight Nov. 3. It ended with him getting cut on or around his hand, she said.

Le'Mona said Thomas had braces on his teeth, without wires connecting them, and his lip was cut on them during the fight.

The sheriff's office did not answer specific questions about the fight or injuries Thomas's family said he sustained.

The preliminary autopsy release revealed Thomas had no "actively infected wounds," but there was "evidence of therapeutic intervention at the hospital and healed scars." More testing is pending, and the death investigation is still open, Rouse said.

When Thomas's father and the mother of his children went to visit Thomas Monday (Nov. 9), they were told after waiting a while that the person who was supposed to coordinate the 15-minute visit was out of the office and had no replacement. The visit never happened. Le'Mona Deal said she now wonders if Thomas was "going through anything" jail officials didn't want his family to see.

Le'Mona Deal said she understands her younger brother was in custody of the sheriff's office and the agency must cater to security concerns regarding access to family members. But she wonders if someone could have been done something to prevent Thomas from dying, and it's troubling she may never know that answer.

"They're in there," she said. "They can cover up what they want to cover up."

While Thomas' death investigation is continuing, a series of reports from NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune in 2014 found the facility has a troubling history regarding inmate deaths that

includes high death rates and mishandling of death investigations. Rouse has since added reforms to the way the investigations are conducted.

Siblings search for answers

Thomas had been in prison since Sept. 24 and was accused of robbing a Circle K convenience store on the 6000 block of Magazine Street. He pleaded not guilty to the charge the same day he was brought to the hospital.

Le'Mona said Thomas grew up in a two-parent household near Central City. He was family oriented and a devoted father to his 9-year-old daughter, ThaiLi, and his 3-year-old son, Calvin Jr., or CJ, she said. Most of all, Le'Mona Deal said she'll miss his personality and his memorable smile.

Thomas used to work construction and held other jobs, but it was difficult for him to keep a job because manual labor was a challenge with his disease. He had lately become depressed. He lost his job and couldn't pay bills, which she believes led him down the wrong path. "He took it hard," she said, but his behavior still surprised her.

"I couldn't wrap my head around why he was going the route he was going," Le'Mona Deal said.

Because they were so close in age, they were like twins, Le'Mona Deal said. She said she would have liked to have known he was that sick before getting that call from Frank Deal. She wishes someone would have contacted them so they could be informed of the seriousness of his condition before he died.

"It just would have been good to know," she said. "Just because he's an inmate, you don't treat him like he's a nobody."

Frank Deal said he wishes his brother was given an opportunity to heal.

"I'm going to miss his presence -- him," he said.

A vigil for Thomas has been planned for 6 p.m. Thursday (Nov. 19) near the intersection of South Robertson and Erato streets.

Le'Mona Deal spoke to the coroner Wednesday, she said, but still has questions about why her brother's health took a turn for the worse from which he could not return.

"I want answers," she said. "My mother wants answers. My brother wants answers. Latasha (Rogers, his children's mother) wants answers. And I want answers for my nephew and niece."

Correction: In an earlier version of this article, Le'Mona Deal's name was incorrectly spelled. The current version is correct.



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CORONER'S REPORT

(pursuant to R.S. 44:19 (E)(3))

I, Dwight McKenna, CORONER FOR THE PARISH OF ORLEANS, certify the following report of death:

REPORTED NAME OF DECEASED:	Thomas, Calvin
ADDRESS:	
SEX:	Male
DATE AT BIRTH:	Oct 21, 1981
AGE AT DEATH:	34 years 0 months 24 days
RACE:	African American / Black
DATE AND TIME OF DEATH:	Nov 15, 2015 at 10:51
PLACE OF DEATH:	
DATE AND TIME OF AUTOPSY:	Nov 17, 2015 at 07:00
CAUSE(S) OF DEATH:	complications of hemoglobin sc disease
MANNER OF DEATH:	Natural

DWIGHT MCKENNA
CORONER, ORLEANS PARISH

DATE: **November 20, 2024**

R.S. 44:19 (E)(3)

(3) A coroner's report is a document that includes the name of the decedent, address, sex, date of birth, age, and race of the decedent, date and time of death, place of death, date and time of autopsy, when applicable, and the cause and manner of death, including any scientifically contributing factors. The coroner's report is a public record, and the coroner or his designee shall release this report to the news media, any other person, the Department of Children and Family Services, when appropriate, the spouse, parent, sibling, child, grandchild, niece, nephew, aunt, or uncle of the decedent, or to the person with the right to control and authorize the interment of the decedent as provided in R.S. 8:655(A). However, nothing in this Paragraph shall authorize the release of the information set forth in this Paragraph prior to notification of the next of kin of the deceased unless no next of kin can be determined or, despite reasonable efforts by the coroner's office, no next of kin can be located. The provisions of this Paragraph shall not require the release of information in non-coroner cases, nor shall it prohibit the coroner from releasing information pursuant to R.S. 13:5713 or Children's Code Article 609 to the Department of Children and Family Services.