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JURY FINDS FAILURE TO MANAGE VULNERABLE PRISONER CONTRIBUTED TO HIS DEATH

The jury in the inquest into the death of Dennis Williams, a 23 year old black man who was found hanged from the window bars of his cell in HMP Bedford on 27 December 2004, today returned their verdict.

The jury heard evidence that Dennis Williams had a range of very complex needs. He had a history of mental health problems, substance misuse, a borderline learning disability which made him vulnerable to bullying and susceptible to the manipulation of others and a willingness to please. He was seen as a high risk of self harm or suicide.

Dennis arrived at HMP Bedford in September 2004 and during the months before he died was placed on a suicide and self harm monitoring form (F2052SH) on numerous occasions. Dennis attempted suicide by hanging on three separate occasions. Each time he was found by staff performing the regular observations required when a prisoner is the subject of a F2052SH.

On 24 December a decision was made to take Dennis off the suicide watch he had been placed on three days earlier after having made threats to commit suicide. The inquest heard that the watch was closed on Dennis' assurances that he would not hurt himself and that staff ignored Dennis' obvious distress regarding a pending adjudication. It was clear from the evidence that staff believed Dennis was an attention seeker who wished to manipulate the system. When Dennis was found hanging on the evening of 27 December 2004 it is believed he had been dead for some time.

The jury concluded that:

“He died at HMP Bedfordshire on 27 December 2004 between 17.30 and 19.45. He was a vulnerable individual prone to psychotic episodes but this was not a clinical condition. The closure of the F2052SH on the 24th December 2004 was premature particularly because of the change in his behaviour in the preceding days. In addition the adjudication postponed until 27 Dec or later contributed to the raised levels of anxiety of Mr Williams. The increased risk in self harm of Mr Williams was not adequately managed by HMP Bedford and Mr Williams died by his own hands unintentionally.”

Novlette and Derrick Williams, parents of Dennis Williams said:

“The loss of Dennis is something we feel more than we can express in words. Dennis was a kind and thoughtful person, he was not a danger to society and was never

violent or dangerous to anyone but himself. Dennis needed help from professional people - he was not well. We believe so strongly that prison was not the right place for him and that his needs were not recognised there. We are appalled that no steps were taken toward contacting us following Dennis' suicide attempts. Had we been made aware, we as a family could have intervened and Dennis' death may have been prevented."

Deborah Coles, co-director of INQUEST, said

"This is another death where a highly vulnerable man's repeated suicide attempts were not taken seriously by those charged with his care. The inquest heard evidence of staff knowingly breaching policies designed to protect life. The prison service must be asked to demonstrate how concrete lessons will be learned from this tragedy".

The Williams family were represented at the inquest by INQUEST Lawyers Group members Anna Prasad (Bhatt Murphy Solicitors) and barrister Adam Straw (Took's Court Chambers)

Notes to editors:

INQUEST is the only non-governmental organisation in England and Wales that works directly with the families of those who die in custody. It provides an independent free legal and advice service to bereaved people on inquest procedures and their rights in the coroner's courts.

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