

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 7, 2023

The Honorable Merrick Garland  
United States Attorney General  
Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20530-0001

Dear Attorney General Garland:

Last year, the Department of Justice prosecuted and a jury convicted the former Sheriff of Clayton County, Georgia for violating the constitutional rights of pretrial detainees in the county jail. Since then, however, my office continues to receive disturbing reports concerning continued abuses inside the jail he once led. These reports paint a deeply disturbing portrait of systemic rights violations that cannot be overlooked. Rooted in our shared commitment to uphold the pillars of justice and civil rights, I ask the Department of Justice to honor its mandate under the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act (CRIPA) and investigate Clayton County Jail.

One month after the former sheriff's conviction, Terry Thurmond was booked into Clayton County Jail and died one day later. The 38-year-old man struggled with bipolar disorder and paranoid schizophrenia—a fact the jail failed to document—and tried to jump from a second-story ledge before inmates and jailers pulled him back. During the subsequent struggle, officers shocked Mr. Thurmond with a stun gun and left him lifeless for 20 minutes before emergency medical officials arrived, according to a medical examiner's report ruling his death a homicide.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier this year, a nonprofit news organization reported harrowing accounts from the facility. One man told the reporter that “bedbugs feast on him at night...but the guards won't give him a new uniform.” By this article's publication date in March, the man had recently received his first pair of underwear—a hand-me-down from another detainee—after the pair he was wearing was taken away upon his arrival in October.<sup>2</sup>

Bleak conditions like bedbug infestations are not limited to Clayton County Jail but reports of medical neglect at the facility shock the conscience. The same journalist described a 32-year-old man named Alan Willison at the jail who “begged for medical help for nearly two months before

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriella Nunez, “Disheartening to see’ | Video shows 5 jailers pin Clayton County inmate down, use Taser before his death,” 11Alive, January 30, 2023, <https://www.11alive.com/article/news/local/terry-lee-thurmond-clayton-county-detention-center-death/85-817fba9f-4ddc-443f-96ff-6bb744b20f55>.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Weill-Greenberg, “Georgia Jail Detainees Say Their Lives Are at Stake Ahead of Key Sheriff’s Election,” The Appeal, March 13, 2023, <https://theappeal.org/clayton-county-jail-sheriff-election/>.

succumbing to testicular cancer in January.”<sup>3</sup> Sharing snippets of contemporaneous conversations between Mr. Willison, his mother, and the jail, the reporter wrote:

In a Dec. 5 email, Willison told [his mother] that his left testicle was the size of his palm and “hard as a rock.” It felt like his organs were “shutting down.” A week later, Willison wrote that he was “in excruciating pain” but couldn’t put any medical requests [sic] because he had exceeded the maximum amount allowed. “I feel like I’m dying and Clayton County jail taking there [sic] sweet time,” Willison wrote on Dec. 30.

At the same time, Willison was frantically pleading for medical attention. He sent 11 different messages to the jail’s medical staff between Nov. 23 and Jan. 17. He wrote that his left testicle was the size of a “couple golf balls,” and the pain kept him from sleeping, but he was only provided “Tylenol type medication.” ...

In his last message to staff, on Jan. 17, Willison wrote: “I need to go to the emergency room. I have sharp pain on my right side and stomach and I can’t take a full breath. I’m having a hard time with walking.” A medical staffer responded by telling him, “you will be evaluated ... to night [sic].” Willison died just over a week later.<sup>4</sup>

These are only a few of the cases in the public record—these examples do not include the stories of Carin Hatchett, Demetrius Alexander, Eugene Evans, Jaylan Goodman, and many more people who according to public reporting met similar, untimely, unnecessary fates in this facility.<sup>5</sup> The ink on their obituaries is dry. But more incarcerated individuals at Clayton County Jail will likely die without federal intervention.

Just last month my office heard from a man who alleged that guards beat him in the showers, threatened to stun him with a Taser despite his disclosure that he had a heart condition, and transported him to a hospital when he collapsed in cardiac arrest. He survived but was hospitalized for six days and, according to him, was left with a bill for \$95,684.85.

There appears to be a pattern and practice of civil rights violations in this jail that result in preventable deaths and jeopardize public trust. As one detainee told a reporter earlier this year: “We need somebody to come in here and see about this. The Department of Justice, somebody needs to come.”<sup>6</sup> I echo this detainee’s call and ask for your assistance.

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Weill-Greenberg, “Georgia Man Begged for Medical Care for Months Before Dying in Jail, Report Finds,” *The Appeal*, April 12, 2023, <https://theappeal.org/alan-willison-clayton-county-jail-death/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Redmon, “Record numbers of people are dying in Georgia’s largest jails,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.ajc.com/news/record-numbers-of-people-are-dying-in-georgias-largest-jails/XWCZXELVPRC2JEB6C7NK3L6C6M/>; Hope Dean, “Family calls on officials to investigate Clayton County jail detainee death,” *AJC*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.ajc.com/news/family-calls-on-officials-to-investigate-clayton-county-jail-detainee-death/GZMBC5BBCNCWFMA5N6VJNBIOKI/>; Jeremy Redmon, “AJC Investigation: Georgia failed to report jail deaths to feds,” *AJC*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.ajc.com/news/ajc-investigation-georgia-failed-to-report-jail-deaths-to-feds/36GNFRVRTFGNRA44EY7GY2ZSOU/>; Robin Kemp, “GBI confirms Clayton County Jail homicide arrest,” *The Clayton Crescent*, July 15, 2022, <https://claytoncrescent.org/2022/07/15/gbi-confirms-clayton-county-jail-homicide-arrest/>.

<sup>6</sup> Weill-Greenberg, *supra* note 2.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Ossoff", written in a cursive style.

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Senator Jon Ossoff

Chairman, U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Human Rights