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CRIME & COURTS

## Meck jail failed to observe teen who hanged himself, then tried to hide lapses, lawsuit says

BY MICHAEL GORDON

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The mother of a 17-year-old who hung himself in the Mecklenburg jail in November 2020 has sued the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office and others in connection with her son's death. *Observer file photo*



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The mother of a teenager who killed himself in the Mecklenburg County jail claims that detention officers failed to adequately observe her son even though he had been put on tighter security, then tried to hide the violations by filing false reports, according to her new lawsuit.

The federal complaint, filed Monday by Adrianna Blackwell, names state correctional officials along with members of the sheriff's departments in Mecklenburg and Rockingham counties for failing to ensure the safety of a 17-year-old from Rockingham County who was found hanging in his Mecklenburg juvenile cell on Nov. 21, 2020.

[The N.C. Department of Public Safety](#) identified the youth at the time of his death as Desmond W. The lawsuit refers to him by the initials D.W.

The complaint alleges multiple constitutional violations as well other claims against officials with the N.C. Department of Public Safety and the two sheriff's offices.

The complaint also charges that the state along with the Rockingham and Mecklenburg sheriff's offices failed to adequately share the accumulating signs that Desmond W. was a suicide risk. Had they, the teen would have been kept under a more restrictive "suicide watch" in the Mecklenburg jail, the lawsuit claims.

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The Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office declined comment Monday, citing a pending legal matter.

Some of the most damning allegations are reserved for Mecklenburg Sheriff Garry McFadden and his staff, who took over custody of the youth the day before his death. Ten days earlier the youth had been charged with first-degree murder in Rockingham County, according to the lawsuit.

Based on interviews with Mecklenburg detention officers, Desmond W. was placed on "suicide alert" after being admitted to the Mecklenburg jail, the lawsuit claims. That meant jailers, under state regulations, had to visually observe him every 10 minutes to make sure he was safe.

The teen also should have been put in a cell without bed sheets, sharp objects or movable furnishings, according to the complaint. None of that happened.

According to the lawsuit, Desmond was not adequately observed for at least an hour before he was found dangling from a bed sheet that had been tied to a metal grate on the ceiling of his cell.

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After the teen's death, jailers manipulated documents to hide some of the observation gaps, making it appear they had made more visits to Desmond W's cell than they had, the complaint claims.

The lawsuit was filed by attorneys Micheal Littlejohn of Charlotte and Abraham Rubert-Schewel of Durham.

Littlejohn told the Observer on Monday that it is based in part on records from the investigation into the teen's death by the State Bureau of Investigation and surveillance videos from the Mecklenburg jail.

"A review of both the SBI records and accompanying (jail) surveillance footage reveal that the defendants' written records did not match the surveillance video, which showed that corrections officers checked on D.W. with alarming infrequency during the hours (leading up to his death)," the lawyers said in a statement

accompanying the complaint.

Littlejohn also represents the family of Karon Golightly, 20, who died in the jail in May 2021. [A state report](#) says Mecklenburg jailers also failed to make the required visible sightings of Golightly in the hours before his death. The state made the same finding in its investigation into the suicide death of John Devin Haley that same month.

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Meanwhile, questions concerning jail safety have continued to arise in [McFadden](#) and in [McFadden's](#) re-election bid. He is being opposed in next month's Democratic Primary by two former Mecklenburg deputies highly critical of his management of the jail.

[McFadden](#) has blamed most of the jail's safety violation on an exodus of detention officers during the pandemic.

Desmond W. left a suicide note, which he had written with a pencil he should not have been allowed to have, the lawsuit says.

It read: "tell my family I'm sorry."

It was followed by an acronym: "IICSARNKM," short for "If I commit suicide at least a real n--- had killed me," a rap lyric the youth had been heard repeating two weeks before when he was first jailed in Rockingham County.

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Michael Gordon has been the Observer's legal affairs writer since 2013. He has been an editor and reporter at the paper since 1992, occasionally writing about schools, religion, politics and sports. He spent two summers as "Bikin Mike," filing stories as he pedaled across the Carolinas.

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