



PRESS RELEASE

Civil Rights Groups and Survivor Challenge Deadly Pattern of Abuse at Harford County Jail, Urging Systemic Reform

Federal lawsuit alleges “lethal pattern of deliberate indifference” and “malign” tactics fueling suicides and punishing people in mental health crisis

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BALTIMORE, MARYLAND — Harford County jail suicide survivor Charles Morris and the local NAACP joined on Tuesday with the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland, the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, and the law firm, Mayer Brown LLP, in filing a sweeping civil rights lawsuit in federal district court in Baltimore. The suit challenges the unconstitutional and unlawful deadly pattern of abuse at the Harford County Detention Center (HCDC) in Harford County, Maryland.

The lawsuit describes, in devastating detail, the jail's unrelenting years-long pattern of death and suffering among people not convicted of any crime — documenting at least 20 recent incidents of suicide and self-harm involving newly admitted people in pretrial detention.

“A jail’s most basic constitutional obligation is to keep people alive,” said Sonia Kumar, Senior Staff Attorney at the ACLU of Maryland. “Harford County jail has catastrophically failed that duty, repeatedly focusing more on protecting the jail’s reputation than what to do differently to save lives.”

Backed by expert analysis and data showing HCDC’s suicide rate is five times the national average, the lawsuit asserts that detainees are driven to self-harm by the jail’s combination of deficient screening, excessive isolation and dangerous bunks easily used for hanging. It documents HCDC uses of force and other dehumanizing tactics on suicidal detainees, essentially punishing them for mental health crises. Despite repeat, often eerily similar hanging deaths, and efforts by the NAACP and others urging jail officials to act, they have not.

Plaintiff Charles Morris, an NAACP member, nearly died as a result. As explained in the lawsuit:

Today, he is glad to be alive. But for a few dark hours in August 2024, Defendants' misconduct robbed him of all hope. HCDC staff ignored red flags noted in their own written policies, including Mr. Morris's tearful confession that he did not see a reason for living, his diagnoses of major depression and bipolar disorder, and his seizure disorder. They locked Mr. Morris in a solitary cell for 23 hours a day, with a bunk bed practically purpose-built for suicide attempts. Predictably, like others before him, he hung himself. When jail staff found him, he had apparently been hanging for several minutes and was not breathing. He was rushed to Bayview Hospital, where he spent a week fighting for his life.

Defendants then sought to cover up the incident to prevent Mr. Morris's family from discovering HCDC's malfeasance, insisting no family be notified and that Mr. Morris remain alone with no loved ones to support him or assist in medical decision-making as he lay near death, hospitalized in a coma. Defendants directed hospital staff that Mr. Morris' family would only be notified of his devastating injuries if he became brain dead.

Rather than investigating how the attempt could have been prevented, Harford's Sheriff issued a public statement praising the jail for saving Morris's life — without acknowledging that the conditions leading to the attempt were created by the jail itself.

Having survived, Mr. Morris says he hopes this case will spare others: "I'm rebuilding my life. But I will never forget those dark hours when the jail pushed me to the brink, or how they isolated me after I nearly died. No one should have to go through that, and no family should be kept in the dark when their loved one is fighting for their life."

"After years of deaths and devastating injuries, the failure to make basic changes has caused immense suffering for our members and their families, many of whom have been in crisis," said Willie A. Flowers, President of the NAACP's Central Maryland Region. "It has also put HCDC staff — who work hard trying to do their jobs — in the horrible position of trying to save lives that should not have been endangered in the first place. We hope the end result of this case is to protect everyone in the community."

The lawsuit raises claims under the state and federal constitutions, and federal disability rights laws. It names as defendants Sheriff Jeffrey Gahler, Warden Daniel J. Galbraith, Harford County, and the State of Maryland. Among the many disturbing incidents of human suffering, it documents are:

- In 2019, a man hung himself at HCDC shortly after his admission to the jail. Weeks later, another man, who had been at the jail for less than a week and was on suicide watch, extensively rehearsed his hanging and then hung himself—all captured on video.
- In 2021, a man confided to staff that he was struggling with his first ever incarceration, was unable to reach his family, and displayed worsening mental health symptoms due to his isolation. He was sent back to solitary in a cell with a pointless bunk bed and found hanging unconscious the next day, later dying.
- In 2022, deputies who placed a man on suicide watch violently entered his cell, striking him with a shield and forcibly handcuffed him to the bed before cutting off his pants with shears and stripping him of his clothing.
- Nathaniel Powell Jr., who in 2023 was detoxing heavily and told staff he was in excruciating pain, was left to deteriorate in isolated confinement in a cell with an unnecessary bunk bed. He was found dead, hanging from the bunk.
- Also in 2023, a man who had been referred to mental health staff and identified as having a special medical need, was isolated for days. He became so acutely distressed

that he hung himself from the superfluous bunk. A few months later, another man made a nearly identical hanging attempt *in the very same cell*.

- In May 2024, a woman who was withdrawing from opioids and experiencing other health issues deteriorated to the point of death while purportedly on suicide watch.

“The intake process in jails represents an accused person’s most vulnerable moment,” said Leslie Faith Jones, Supervisory Counsel at the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. “The presumption of innocence requires that Harford County Jail be held accountable for not keeping people safe from preventable, life-threatening harm in pre-trial detention.”

“We stand with the NAACP, Mr. Morris, and our co-counsel to protect the rights of people who have not been convicted of any crime,” said Mayer Brown partner Alex Lakatos. “Officials cannot ignore known risks of self-harm. This suit seeks accountability, and the basic safeguards Harford County urgently needs to save lives and prevent needless suffering.”

The plaintiffs are represented by attorneys Sonia Kumar, Deborah Jeon, Gina Elleby and Dara Johnson of the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland; Leslie Faith Jones and Madeleine Gates of the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs; and Alex Latakos, Vionna Moore, Gabriela N. Duenas Acevedo, and Mecca Aikens of Mayer Brown LLP.

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