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POLICE PROBE INMATE'S UNUSUAL DEATH

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Article Text:

Authorities are investigating the death of a mentally ill Miami-Dade **jail** inmate found in his cell with a body temperature nearly 20 degrees below normal, according to police and **jail** documents.

Willie Daniels died in the emergency surgery room at Ryder Trauma Center at Jackson Memorial Hospital on Jan. 29. His core temperature was 79 degrees, according to a police report. No cause of death has been determined, according to the Miami-Dade medical examiner's office. As is routine with inmate deaths, Miami-Dade homicide detectives are investigating.

Daniels, 47, was being held in a psychiatric wing on the ninth floor of the Miami-Dade County **Jail**. He was awaiting trial on charges of burglary and resisting arrest.

``We are extremely concerned that Mr. Daniels, one of our clients, died in the mental health floor of the county **jail**, apparently of **hypothermia**," Miami-Dade Public Defender Bennett Brummer said. Daniels was found under his bunk bed around 5 p.m. after not responding for meal time, according to documents obtained by The Miami Herald. He was taken to the **jail**'s clinic, where he was examined by a nurse at 5:19 p.m. An ambulance was called four minutes later. He was pronounced dead at Ryder Trauma Center at 5:43 p.m., the documents show.

He had ``multiple cardio pulmonary arrests" - meaning his heart and lungs shut down - but ``what caused the death remained unknown," according to corrections documents.

79 DEGREES

A doctor determined his ``core body temp was 79 degrees," a Miami-Dade police report said. It's unclear what factors led to this low body temperature. Also unclear is what Daniels was wearing or what, if any, bedding he had in his cell.

``This tragedy is shocking, especially in an area of the **jail** where the inmates are supposed to be under continuous scrutiny," Brummer said. ``This is one more example of the failure of our healthcare and criminal justice system to protect those most in need of their attention."

Veteran pathologists contacted Tuesday also found the case puzzling.

Dr. Joseph Davis, Miami-Dade County's former medical examiner, said his office rarely saw cases of **hypothermia**, though he could remember one incident involving someone who stowed away in a refrigerated railroad car. "We just don't see it like they do in places like Minnesota," Davis said. He added that if Daniels "were lying on a cold floor," his body temperature could drop significantly. Davis said he would want to know the temperature inside the **jail's** psychiatric ward.

Dr. Harry Bonnell, former chief deputy medical examiner in San Diego, said Daniels would have been more vulnerable to the cold due to his reported malnutrition. Some psychiatric drugs can raise body temperature, which could have prompted Daniels to splash water on himself to cool down. Such a move would have ultimately lowered his body temperature.

"Taking away blankets is a nice way to prevent suicides," Bonnell said of the **jail's** policy that bans blankets from the psychiatric ward. "But there are other ways of keeping people warm. Other facilities don't allow blankets, but they are cautious and watch closely."

Advocates and lawyers say people with mental illness often suffer from serious medical conditions and are particularly vulnerable in **jail** cells.

NUTRITION

"Most of them live on the street, most don't have proper nutrition, most of them do not get medication on a consistent basis for their medical and mental illness," said Owen McNamee, a Broward assistant public defender who has handled involuntary commitment hearing for 16 years.

Coral Gables police arrested Daniels on Dec. 13. Officers found him hiding in the closet of a Coral Gables home. They shocked him twice with a Taser stun gun to subdue him after he lunged at an officer, according to a police report.

It was the last of many trips through Miami-Dade's criminal justice system. During the 1970s, Daniels was arrested about 10 times, on charges ranging from breaking and entering to drug possession and robbery. His arrest record in the 1980s is blank.

In recent years, he had been charged with arrests typical of the homeless. Since 2000, he had been arrested 22 times on charges such as trespassing, disorderly conduct, criminal mischief, loitering and drinking in public.

'MALNOURISHED'

When psychologist Sonia I. Ruiz interviewed him on Jan. 11, she confronted a "thin and malnourished" man who smelled badly, according to her psychological evaluation. When asked where he was born, Daniels answered: "November or August, 1948." He repeatedly told the psychologist that he was hungry, according to internal documents.

Ruiz concluded that Daniels met the criteria for involuntary treatment at a psychiatric hospital. He was not capable of defending himself in court, she wrote. Daniels may have been suffering from schizophrenia, a severe and uncurable mental illness. ``The defendant is probably hallucinating or out of contact with reality," Ruiz wrote on Jan. 12.

On Jan. 29, a social worker cleared Daniels to be moved from the C wing of the ninth floor, where nurses maintain constant visual contact on inmates, according to documents.

Daniels was moved to the general population of the psychiatric ward before he died.