



Province of British Columbia

VERDICT AT CORONERS INQUEST

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS AS A RESULT OF THE CORONER'S INQUEST PURSUANT TO SECTION 38 OF THE CORONERS ACT, [SBC 2007] c 15, INTO THE DEATH OF

DESJARLAIS

SURNAME

DEANNA RENEE

GIVEN NAMES

An Inquest was held at The Burnaby Coroners Court, in the municipality of Burnaby

in the Province of British Columbia, on the following dates: May 7-May 15, 2018

before: Brynne Redford, Presiding Coroner.

into the death of Desjarlais Deanna Renee 27 [] Male [x] Female (Last Name) (First Name) (Middle Name) (Age)

The following findings were made:

Date and Time of Death: April 20, 2016 Unknown (Date) (time)

Place of Death: Hawthorne Park Surrey, British Columbia (Location) (Municipality/Province)

Medical Cause of Death:

(1) Immediate Cause of Death: a) Undetermined Due to or as a consequence of

Antecedent Cause if any: b) Due to or as a consequence of

Giving rise to the immediate cause (a) above, stating underlying cause last. c)

(2) Other Significant Conditions Contributing to Death: Possible Drug Overdose

Classification of Death: [] Accidental [] Homicide [] Natural [] Suicide [x] Undetermined

The above verdict certified by the Jury on the 15th day of May AD, 2018

Brynne Redford

Presiding Coroner's Printed Name

[Handwritten Signature]

Presiding Coroner's Signature



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PARTIES INVOLVED IN THE INQUEST:

Presiding Coroner: Ms. Brynne Redford
Inquest Counsel: Mr. Bryant Mackey
Court Reporting/Recording Agency: Verbatim Words West Ltd.
Participants/Counsel: None

The Sheriff took charge of the jury and recorded 1 exhibit. 27 witnesses were duly sworn and testified.

PRESIDING CORONER'S COMMENTS:

The following is a brief summary of the circumstances of the death as set out in the evidence presented to the jury at the inquest. This is to assist in understanding, but does not replace, the jury verdict and recommendations. This summary is not evidence.

Ms. Deanna Renee Desjarlais, a member of the Kawacatoose First Nation, was originally from Saskatchewan. She was HIV and Hepatitis C positive, had a history of illicit drug use, and was engaged in survival sex work.

In late December 2015, Ms. Desjarlais travelled from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan to Vernon, British Columbia. Throughout January 2016, she resided intermittently at the Gateway Shelter and was admitted to Vernon Jubilee Hospital on several occasions, primarily for addiction-related concerns. In late January, Ms. Desjarlais was arrested in Vernon and remanded into provincial custody at the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women in Maple Ridge. Ms. Desjarlais was found guilty of the charged offence on March 9, 2016 and was released from custody on that date, with conditions set out in a 12-month probation order.

Ms. Desjarlais' specific activities following her release from custody remain unclear. She was reportedly picked up by a support worker and transported to a recovery house in Surrey. She reported to a probation officer in Surrey on March 10, 2016 and was asked to leave her recovery house after several days. Ms. Desjarlais made arrangements to reside at a second recovery house, though it is unclear how long she remained at this residence.

Throughout March 2016, Ms. Desjarlais connected with a number of health and social services in the lower mainland, including Surrey Memorial Hospital, the Oak Tree Clinic in Vancouver, an outreach worker from the Women's Resource Society of the Fraser Valley, and the Jim Pattison Outpatient Care Centre in Surrey, where she was referred for outpatient antibiotic therapy for an infection. It was reported that due to an outstanding warrant in Saskatchewan, Ms. Desjarlais was unable to obtain income assistance in British Columbia.

Ms. Desjarlais' whereabouts from late March through the middle of April 2016 remain largely unknown. On April 18, 2016, she had a documented interaction with the Vancouver Police



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Department and on April 19, 2016, she was in contact with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("RCMP") in North Vancouver. Ms. Desjarlais was last seen alive on April 20, 2016, during an interaction with Transit Police at Waterfront Station in Vancouver. Police officers involved in all three interactions indicated that Ms. Desjarlais did not appear to be in any distress or in need of their assistance during their dealings.

As Ms. Desjarlais was not seen alive after April 20, 2016, the jury considered this the date of her death.

On May 17, 2016, the remains of an unidentified female were discovered in Hawthorne Park in Surrey. The remains were in an advanced state of decomposition and remained unidentified until mid-September, when positively identified as Ms. Deanna Desjarlais.

Of note, on May 9, 2016, Ms. Desjarlais was reported missing to the Vancouver Police Department by a woman she considered a mother figure, who grew concerned after she had not heard from Ms. Desjarlais in several weeks. Following initial investigation and erroneous information which led them to believe that Ms. Desjarlais was alive on May 11, 2016, the Vancouver Police Department closed their Missing Persons Investigation on May 12, 2016. On June 30, 2016, the Vancouver Police Department's Missing Persons Unit was once again contacted regarding Ms. Desjarlais, this time by her sister. Ms. Desjarlais was first proposed as a possible match for the unidentified remains in early September 2016.

A post-mortem examination was conducted on May 19, 2016. The pathologist found no evidence of injury or natural disease, but noted that interpretation of his findings was severely limited by the advanced state of decomposition of the remains. Toxicological analysis on post-mortem liver samples detected methamphetamine, amphetamine, methadone, fentanyl, diazepam and benzoylecgonine (the breakdown product of cocaine) in Ms. Desjarlais' system at the time of her death. The pathologist concluded that the specific cause of Ms. Desjarlais' death was undetermined, but that the combination of drugs identified within her liver played a contributory role, and was possibly the cause of her death.

In September 2016, Ms. Desjarlais was ultimately identified with the assistance of the RCMP's Unidentified Human Remains Unit. The Unidentified Human Remains Unit relies on a number of tools, including a provincial dental databank, to assist with the identification of remains. Police forces from across British Columbia participate in this database, with the exception of the Vancouver Police Department. As Ms. Desjarlais was missing her two front teeth, had this information been collected and entered into the database, it is possible that she may have been identified prior to September 2016. Although a general fingerprint analysis was initially unsuccessful, once Ms. Desjarlais was identified as a missing person and a potential match for the unidentified remains, identity was successfully confirmed via a manual, one-to-one fingerprint comparison.



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Surrey RCMP conducted a concurrent investigation into the circumstances of Ms. Desjarlais' death. The file was initially with the detachment's General Investigations Unit until being transferred to the Major Crimes Unit in September 2016. RCMP found no evidence of foul play relating to Ms. Desjarlais' death.



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Pursuant to Section 38 of the Coroners Act, the following recommendations are forwarded to the Chief Coroner of the Province of British Columbia for distribution to the appropriate agency:

JURY RECOMMENDATIONS:**To: The Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General**

1. Make changes to the Provincial Policing Standards for Missing Person Investigations to require mandatory participation in the Provincial Dental Data Bank (PDDB) for all provincial and municipal police forces, including the Vancouver Police Department, to assist with the identification of missing persons.

Presiding Coroner Comment: *The jury heard evidence that the PDDB can play a key role in the positive identification of found remains. They also heard evidence that Ms. Desjarlais had distinguishing dental characteristics, which may have assisted with the earlier identification of her remains, had this information been gathered and entered in the PDDB.*

To: The Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction

2. End the practice of denying income assistance benefits based on the existence of outstanding warrants.

Presiding Coroner Comment (Recommendations 2 and 3): *The jury heard evidence that financial support through income assistance is essential to protecting the wellbeing of vulnerable women, who are at increased risk if they have no means of support. The jury suggested that the current system further marginalizes vulnerable women who may have outstanding warrants or who may have been recently incarcerated*



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**To: The Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and
The Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General**

3. Integrate access to income assistance benefits into release planning in correctional facilities for all individuals who have been sentenced or remanded into custody. This should be available to both new and continuing income assistance recipients.

Presiding Coroner Comment (Recommendations 2 and 3): *The jury heard evidence that financial support through income assistance is essential to protecting the wellbeing of vulnerable women, who are at increased risk if they have no means of support. The jury suggested that the current system further marginalizes vulnerable women who may have outstanding warrants or who may have been recently incarcerated.*

To: The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing

4. Significantly increase the availability of easily-accessible low-barrier and publicly-funded housing as a core harm reduction measure for Indigenous women, women with HIV, vulnerable women and women recently released from custody.

Presiding Coroner Comment: *The jury heard evidence that the existing network of unregulated recovery houses is not a satisfactory environment to ensure the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable women with substance misuse issues.*

To: The Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General

5. Release planning, including counselling services, must begin at the point of intake into a correctional centre to ensure that an individual has basic identification so that access to health and social services and other key supports is not jeopardized upon release.

Presiding Coroner Comment (Recommendations 5 and 6): *The jury heard evidence that release planning for women being released from custody is limited, particularly for those women who were remanded into custody. The jury identified a significant gap in the provision of necessary care to ensure the safety and wellbeing of women transitioning from a custodial setting.*



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6. Implement training for corrections staff regarding community resources available to individuals upon release.

Presiding Coroner Comment (Recommendations 5 and 6): *The jury heard evidence that release planning for women being released from custody is limited, particularly for those women who were remanded into custody. The jury identified a significant gap in the provision of necessary care to ensure the safety and wellbeing of women transitioning from a custodial setting.*

7. Repurpose the currently vacant open living facility associated with the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, or such facilities elsewhere, as non-custodial transitional housing for vulnerable women released from custody.

Presiding Coroner Comment: *The jury heard evidence that the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women currently has a vacant open living facility. It was their perspective that this centre may be a wasted resource that could potentially be used as transitional housing to ensure improved integration into the community for women leaving custody.*

**To: The Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General,
The Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction,
The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and
The Minister of Health**

8. Engage in cooperative ministerial action, within the appropriate framework of privacy and security safeguards, to implement an effective continuum of services to foster communication and information sharing among providers of health and social supports and custodial care.

Presiding Coroner Comment: *The jury identified significant gaps in the continuum of care between correctional settings and community living. They heard evidence about limited information sharing between various services providing supports to Ms. Desjarlais (including shelters, hospitals, and correctional centres).*



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**To: The Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General,
The Minister of Health,
The Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and
The Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation**

9. Increase culturally appropriate support services for Indigenous women and provide training for community supports and corrections staff on available Indigenous supports within the community.

Presiding Coroner Comment: *The jury indicated that supports for Indigenous women appeared to be overwhelmed and underfunded, and that support services for Indigenous individuals were oftentimes overlooked by mainstream providers.*

**To: The Attorney General, and
The Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General**

10. Reduce incarceration rates for minor and administrative offences through the expanded use of alternative sentencing approaches.

Presiding Coroner Comment: *The jury suggested that incarceration can lead to the disruption of services that contribute to harm reduction and prevention efforts. The jury heard specific testimony about "Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion," a program that currently exists in Seattle, which provides an alternative to incarceration for vulnerable individuals.*