

Young man accused of terrorism gets DHS transfer; advocates say it is not enough

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EDWARDSVILLE – The terrorism charges leveled against Keaun Cook, 21, of Godfrey, have again been a part of local conversations after the young man was arrested from his grandmother's home in 2016 for allegedly supporting ISIS.

Cook was found unfit to stand trial and a judge remanded him to the custody of the Department of Human Services (DHS) on Feb. 6, 2019. Previous rulings in both 2016 and 2017 found Cook fit to stand trial. With this new ruling of “unfit,” Cook will be given to the custody of DHS and placed in a maximum security prison until he can be made fit to stand trial. When that fitness is attained, Cook will stand trial for allegedly making terrorist threats and providing material support for terrorism. He will face up to 70 years in prison if he is found to be guilty.

When Cook was first arrested in the summer of 2016, Madison County States Attorney Tom Gibbons said Cook had made threats against nearby schools, adding lots of lives could have been saved by that arrest. Gibbons would not comment as to whether or not Cook had bomb-making materials or firearms. He did say terrorists around the world were utilizing knives as well as the more deadly vehicle attacks to spread violence.

Cook's grandmother, Debra Thomas, said her grandson did not know anything about ISIS in previous interviews with Riverbender.com.

“He was like a sponge,” she said. “We wouldn't let him watch the news or anything. He probably saw something about it on TV and decided to yell about it or something.”

Thomas said her grandson was not and is not a terrorist. When she called for help that day, she said she was hoping an ambulance would come. When she revealed to a 911 dispatcher her grandson was having a schizophrenic episode, however, she said they told her police would have to accompany the EMTs.

By the time Cook was arrested for allegedly providing material support for ISIS, his grandmother said he spent a large part of being a teenager in isolation. After his 2016 arrest, she said Cook was often held in isolation within the Madison County Jail. In August 2018, Cook was charged with striking a deputy within the Madison County Jail. Thomas believes her grandson was provoked by that employee.

When asked why he was arrested initially and accused of terrorism, Thomas said authorities arrested him after listening to what his younger brother recorded him saying. She also provided messages sent from Cook to a person he believed to be a member of ISIS used as evidence against him. The person Cook may have believed was in ISIS sent him a standard Arabic salutation. Cook replied by saying he believed he was being filmed by the government, possibly because of his name's similarity to Keanu Reeves. He then sent the person he may have believed was in ISIS a graphic image of an ISIS beheading taking place.

Despite this evidence, Thomas said the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) dropped the case.

“They told me that there was nothing they could do about it,” she said. “They said the case was in the hands of Madison County. They promised me my grandson would get the help he needed there.”

Before calling 911 that night, Thomas showed reporters phone records of more than a dozen calls to crisis intervention lines. She said they were not able to assist her. She called authorities when Cook's younger brother had recorded some of his nonsensical rambles from his room. Thomas said her grandson would often talk to disembodied voices, adding he was often not aware of what he was saying.

From Thomas's perspective, Cook always had ADHD and OCD. These caused him to have to cope with behavioral issues his entire life. These issues would land Cook into the Madison County Juvenile Detention Center, where Thomas said he was often kept in isolation due to his outbursts. That time in isolation, coupled with Cook witnessing his mother die at a young age, caused Cook to delve further into his mental illness.

He also experimented with K2, a chemical compound formerly sold at gas stations, which was marketed as potpourri, but mimicked some of the psychoactive effects of cannabis when smoked. K2 often led to delusional and panicked behavior, and was much more dangerous than the plant it was supposed to mimic.

Thomas provided several letters she sent to Gibbons as well as other state, and even federal officials. Only rejection letters were returned. Even the local, state and federal branches of the NAACP responded to her pleas with explanations of why they could not help.

The Transfer to DHS Maximum Security Facility

Following the most recent decision to remand Cook to a DHS maximum security facility to get mental health treatment, however, Gibbon sent forth a press release updating the story, due to both the public outcry following recent media coverage and the concern of the Alton Branch of the NAACP. The transfer was set to happen regardless of this intervention, due to a judge's orders and the efforts of Cook's attorney, Jeff Weishaupt.

“If the NAACP was helping me, the members who go to church with me didn't know they was helping me,” Thomas said Monday afternoon.

Lee Barham said the NAACP was aware of Cook's issues, adding the organization had been working to get mental health for the young man since he was arrested, but said they were not trying to get the charges dropped. He said they advocated to ensure the young man was fit to stand trial, and received that fair trial.

Alton NAACP Vice President, Michael “Doc” Holiday, who also sits on the Madison County Board, said Cook's mental health was brought to his attention a little more than a month ago by Madison County Green Party Chairperson Joshua Young, who also brought it to the attention of Riverbender.com. Holiday and NAACP President Andy Hightower met with Gibbons just after the young man was remanded to the custody of the DHS to be found fit to stand trial.

Gibbons said he was discussing Cook's mental health standing with Holiday since the young man was arrested. Holiday said those chats tapered a bit during the three years Cook has been in the custody of the Madison County Criminal Justice System.

During those years, Cook was found fit to stand trial twice, was ordered to be remanded to DHS custody in May, was not remanded to the custody of the DHS, because the DHS refused the order from a judge, Gibbons said, and allegedly punched a jail employee.

“If he's in there without his medication, and all he did was punch a jailer, I'd say he's doing pretty good despite his mental health issues,” Young said.

Young believes the decision to remand Cook to a maximum security DHS facility is still an injustice. He said Cook poses no real danger to anyone – especially if he receives the treatment and medication he needs. Young described the maximum security facility as “a prison for crazy people.” He also thinks 70 years in prison is too much for the young man to face for doing what Young feels is “too little.”

“You can look at the news articles and interviews at that time,” Young said. “Gibbons made it seem like he had saved a lot of people and caught a real terrorist. You can ask his grandmother. He did not have access to any guns or any bombs. There was nothing he could have done to hurt any schools around him.”

Because of what he perceives as “continued injustice,” Young will still be hosting a demonstration at the February meeting of the Madison County Board Wednesday evening at 5:30 p.m. While he sees the transfer of Cook from the Madison County Jail to a maximum security DHS facility as a possible step in the right direction – as Cook will get treatment and medication, he believes it is still a problem of injustice.

Thomas agreed, adding her grandson may not be in the same position if he were white.

“There's kids out there, my grandson's age and older, they're out there calling in bomb threats at schools all the time,” she said. “You see them get slaps on the wrists. You don't see them put away like my grandson was. You see them get probation or something. It isn't fair. It just isn't fair.”

The full scope of evidence against Cook is not known or available to the public at this time, and all persons charged are innocent until proven guilty