

UPDATE: Keaun Cook Transferred to Maximum Security DHS Mental Health Facility

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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CHESTER, ILL. - A young man from the Riverbend accused of offering support to the Islamic terrorist group, ISIS, was transferred to a maximum security mental health center in Chester, Illinois Monday, his grandmother confirms.

Keaun Cook, 21, of Godfrey, was charged with making terrorist threats and providing material support for a terrorist organization in the summer of 2016. If convicted of these two Class X Felonies, Cook faces a maximum sentence of 70 years. Since his arrest, however, Cook has spent most of his time in isolation while in the custody of the Madison County Jail. Cook allegedly threw urine at a person during his stay in the general population of the jail. He has also been charged with spitting on and punching a deputy in the face since being taken into custody. Those felonies came in August 2018.

The young man's grandmother, Debra Thomas, said the reason for his arrest was mental illness, saying her grandson suffered from schizophrenia after seeing his mother die in front of him when he was only 14 years old. She called the police when Cook was yelling about ISIS. His younger brother recorded him praising the terror group, and messages Cook sent on Facebook to someone he believed to be a member of ISIS read as disjointed ramblings of someone not well in touch with reality. He also sent a graphic news story of a beheading linked to ISIS.

Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons said the call was made to charge Cook with providing material to terrorism due to the amount of mass casualty events done by people making threats such as Cook's. He said people are often left wondering what went wrong after an event like the Vegas Shooting or any other mass murder. Usually, he said, they find someone with severe untreated mental illness and people missing the warning signs, or ignoring them.

Thomas said Cook had ADHD and OCD as a child and young person and developed bipolar disorder as he entered his teenage years. After his mother died in front of him, Thomas said Cook was kept isolated in the Madison County Juvenile Justice System, where he spent at least 18 months of his life due to several behavioral mishaps. While in the custody of that facility, Gibbons said the young man was given "plenty of resources," but Thomas disputes that.

She sent several letters to Riverbender.com she also sent to Gibbons. In them, she expressed deep concern regarding Cook's treatment and overall mental health. She believed her grandson was being kept in isolation unfairly, citing what she believed to be minor infractions during his time in juvenile custody.

When Cook returned to his grandmother, she said he was a different person. She said he was paranoid and constantly feared being watched or followed by the government. After delivering a passionate speech at the February meeting of the Madison County Board, Thomas said her grandson once took her into the quiet basement of their home by themselves and took the battery out of her phone. He told her he was being watched and followed by the FBI and CIA.

This paranoia is what Thomas believes led to her grandson's charges.

Since being charged, Cook has been found fit to stand trial twice in 2016 and 2017. He was remanded to the custody of the Department of Human Services (DHS) in May 2018, but that ruling never quite took. His fitness to stand trial was again questioned in December 2018. In February 2019, he was found unfit and was ordered to go to a DHS maximum security facility for as long as one year to attain fitness to stand trial.

Madison County Green Party Chairperson Joshua Young said he is advocating on the young man's behalf. He and Thomas have been working on getting the charges placed against Cook, which Young described as “bogus,” dropped, or at least moving the matter to a mental health court. They are slated to meet with members of the Madison County Mental Health Board in coming weeks regarding the issue.

As of now, Gibbons shows no sign of dropping the charges altogether, adding “material support” in Cook's case may mean supplying information – as Cook was not known to have access to firearms or bomb-making materials. At the time of Cook's arrest, Gibbons said Cook posed a possible threat to nearby schools. He did live close to both North Elementary School and Lewis and Clark Community College, where Cook was attempting to attain his GED.

Thomas, Young, and Gibbons all supported the need for Cook to get mental health treatment, however. During his time in the Madison County Jail, Cook refused to meet with healthcare professionals, and even refused to talk to a social worker from DHS in order to attain his transfer to a mental health facility.

With the most recent ruling regarding Cook's fitness, however, DHS is treating Cook at its maximum security mental health facility in Chester. Young said in previous interviews he wanted Cook to be moved somewhere closer with lower security – like Alton – so his family could visit him. He said Tuesday, however, he was “elated” regarding Cook's transfer to Chester on Monday.

“I talked with his grandmother, and she was happy with it,” Young said. “If she's happy with it, I'm happy with it.”

Thomas said she plans on visiting her grandson next week, adding she spoke on the phone with nurses from the facility Monday and Tuesday.

“We spoke on the phone,” she said. “They said Keaun is up and walking around. He's not shackled. They said he's going to the commissary and everything.”

Most importantly, Thomas said she was able to talk to someone about ensuring her grandson gets grief counseling. She said she was in her own feelings of grief while her grandson was mourning his mother's passing. She recounted a funeral director of her daughter's funeral warning her to “keep an eye on Keaun.” She said Cook would often “act out” instead of coping with the grief of his mother's death.

This matter has not gone to trial yet, however, so the full amount of evidence against Cook relating to those charges is not a matter of public record. Once Cook is found again fit to stand trial by the DHS facility staff, the full scope of the charges will be available. As of now, however, Gibbons, Thomas, and Young are in agreement Cook's mental health should be the first priority of this case.