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DRRI Statement on the Death of Charlene Liberty

Charlene Liberty was a client of Disability Rights Rhode Island and the lead plaintiff in the class action lawsuit, Liberty v. Rhode Island Department of Corrections. But, more importantly, she was a mother to Breanna, a daughter to Mary and George, and a sister to Elisha, George, David, and Mike. Her death at the age of 38 was far too soon. Those who knew her will always remember her courage in facing unfathomable struggles. Those of us at DRRI who met Charlene Liberty will never forget her.

Ms. Liberty's struggles in institutional settings are well documented and, tragically, all too common. Like many people with mental illness, she was trapped in a system that failed to meet her needs and led to the Rhode Island prison system where she joined the 15-20% of inmates with serious mental illness. And, like too many of her fellow inmates with mental illness, Charlene was placed into solitary confinement. She was isolated and suffered severe mistreatment that made her feel "less than human, depressed, unworthy....and wanting to kill (herself)." Eventually that prison cell was replaced with a state psychiatric hospital where she faced new abuses. She was discharged, untreated and unsupported, without even the most fundamental community services she needed to, literally, stay alive.

Disability Rights Rhode Island shares a portion of the grief as we mourn the loss of a victim of the system. We vow to not let her death be in vain as we investigate the failures of the systems that are intended to protect the most vulnerable among us, and instead too often lead to harm and even death. May Charlene Liberty's legacy be that our mental health system treats people like her with compassion, effective services, and the community-based supports they need to recover and live in peace.



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