



ABORIGINAL LEGAL SERVICES
Gaa kina gwii waabamaa debwewin - All those who seek the truth

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

John-Paul George's Family reacts to the Verdict, Recommendations and what they learned from the Inquest

June 5, 2024, Toronto, Ontario: Today the jury in the Inquest into the shooting death of John-Paul George, an Indigenous man from Matachewan First Nation, returned their verdict after hearing five days of evidence and a half day of submissions. The Jury's Verdict found that John-Paul's death was caused by multiple gunshot wounds to the torso and that the means of death was Homicide. The jury accepted the thirteen (13) recommendations that all parties had jointly suggested, with only slight modifications.

The family was grateful to all those who participated in the Inquest because they had waited four years for the hearing. For the family, the process was an opportunity to hear about what happened before and during the incident and learn details of the death of their son, brother, father, uncle and friend for the first time. Although some questions remain, the Inquest did answer a number of questions that they had and it was important that a public hearing occurred.

Below the family expresses which of these recommendations are important but first wants to address how two civilian witnesses, Sonia Deering and Darryl Deering, who were lawfully summoned to attend the hearing refused to attend. The Inquest learned how these individuals provided misinformation and continued to be uncooperative to the Police the night John-Paul died.

When Sonia Deering and Darryl Deering refused to appear, the family made a motion to have bench warrants issued pursuant to the Coroner's Act. Coroner's Counsel opposed the motion to seek bench warrants. The Presiding Officer determined not to seek bench warrants but his decision included provision to inform the jury about these witnesses actions, to provide instruction including that their failure and refusal to appear "is relevant factor for you to consider when you are assessing the credibility of these witnesses and deciding how much weight to give their statements.". In his instruction and address to the jury the Presiding Officer made a strong condemnation, and specifically said:

At this time, I would also like to take the opportunity to express my strong condemnation of the failure of the Deerings to attend in compliance with the summonses that were issued to them. This behaviour is wholly unacceptable and fundamentally impacts the integrity of the inquest system. It is repugnant to a fair and just society that prioritizes the interests of public safety and reparations with Indigenous people and communities.

The motion, response and decision are all public record and should be available upon request to the Chief Coroner's Office.

Media reports have reported that John-Paul was in the process of a break and enter with firearms with a child's life at risk. The Inquest learned that John-Paul was not breaking and entering but had been at the house of Sonia Deering for hours. He did not bring a firearm into the house. It was clear that he was experiencing some sort of mental health breakdown and that substance use was contributing to his erratic behaviours. It is the Family's position that the call to 9-1-1 was deceptive and misleading. Additionally the evidence heard about Darryl Deering threatening to come to the scene with a gun, and arriving with a pipe, refusing officers commands, not cooperating or providing information created chaotic conditions at the scene. His daughter, Sonia Deering also refused to provide information and she had knowledge about who was in the house. Rather these two civilian witnesses let police believe that there were people with guns breaking into her house while children were in the house.

The family recognizes that an Inquest cannot find blame and is not the process by which any accountability of these two individuals' actions could ever be resolved. The family respects that the Presiding officer made a determination on the motion before him but has concerns about future witnesses' failure to appear and what that might mean to other families of deceased individuals who have lingering questions.

Counsel for the family, Christa Big Canoe, explained that "although the Presiding Officer's charge to the jury was instructive in this instance, the fact that Coroner's Counsel opposed the family's Motion to get a bench warrant is concerning." She said "If lawfully summoned witnesses are not compelled to attend by a bench warrant, then why issue a summons in the first place?" She added "the fear is that any future summoned witness will also not attend. The strong condemnation may not be enough, especially when you have witnesses, like the ones in this case, that clearly misled police and authorities."

John-Paul's mother, Anne stated "If accurate information had been provided to the police, and had Darryl Deering not disrupted police services at the scene, the family believes a completely different outcome may have resulted." she added, " the jury heard he was disruptive enough that police had to direct limited resources to trying to contain him. Sonia Deering also was not being cooperative, and neither of them provided police the information they needed to know." One surprise for the family was that Officers on the scene did not even know some of the facts of the incident until the Inquest itself. Anne notes " The responding platoon's sergeant, Sgt. Bradley did not even know that another civilian witness, Wendy Rhodes, was in the house and had exited the front door during the interaction. Ms. Rhodes did testify and attend the Inquest." According to Anne, "The biggest surprise for the Family was learning that from the time the officer who shot John-Paul arrived on scene until he discharged his firearm was only 2:19 minutes (two minutes and nineteen seconds). We feel like there was no time for de-escalation in that short time"

The Recommendations

The Family appreciated that the jury made 13 recommendations to prevent future deaths similar to the circumstance in which John-Paul died. They are glad that the first recommendation addresses the misinformation that was present in this case by trying to ensure that complete information is conveyed as part of the call for service. The Family was encouraged by the recommendation about reviewing and revising (where necessary) on-scene officer communication and scene management. Finally the Family was grateful that the jury recognized the facts of intergenerational harms and systemic wrongdoing and supported a recommendation to address Indigenous cultural competency, anti-racism, anti-bias and mental health.

Tina, John-Paul's older sister said " I am thankful that the jury's recommendation has recognized that John-Paul was an Indigenous man that had mental health and substance use issues with limited health supports and opportunities. His family loved and cared for him but without adequate resources his issues grew."

Throughout the Inquest, each factual witness was advised that the Family was concerned about everyone's wellness and healing. The jury heard evidence from officers about the impact the shootings had on them. After hearing the Verdict and the Jury's Recommendations, Anne's reflection is that, "this traumatic incident has had an emotional impact on all parties involved and therefore hope that everyone impacted continues to seek healing. That is why recommendations on increasing awareness and support for officers are significant. Everyone needs to have health and mental health support when they experience something like this no matter how they are involved."

The family will now take time for ceremony and further healing and ask that if you have any media inquiries that you please contact:

Christa Big Canoe, counsel for the Family
416-697-5467 (text or call)