



April 20, 2023

Dear Fulton County Commissioners:

The death of Mr. Lashawn Thompson—a man struggling with mental illness, found lifeless in a filthy cell, his body covered with bed bugs—is indescribably tragic, disturbing, and enraging. But it is unfortunately not shocking, as Mr. Thompson is part of a trend: 14 people died in Fulton County detention in the last year alone. Fulton County has long known of the unmentionable violations that happen within the walls of its jails, and yet they have persisted. Years of deaths, tortuous conditions, broken families, litigation, damning investigative reporting—nothing has spurred the County to make meaningful change.

In the wake of this tragedy, the County is again poised to miss the mark in devastating ways. Action being pursued by this Commission—moving down the path toward a new \$2 billion jail—is colossal in scope but aimed in the entirely wrong direction. A \$2 billion taxpayer bill to lock up even more people—predominantly people who are Black and low-income—is not the solution to deplorable conditions and dangerous overcrowding. The County must instead take immediate action to reduce its jail population and, in turn, to ensure that people in its control are no longer in acute danger.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of people in Fulton County jails today should not be there—and would not be there if the County were following the law and its legal obligations (see [\*There Are Better Solutions: An Analysis of Fulton County's Jail Population Data, 2022\*](#)). Nearly half of the people locked in Fulton County jails are sitting there—for months, sometimes years—waiting indictment, often without access to an attorney. Many are stuck in Fulton County jails with a misdemeanor charge only. And many would be released if they simply had more money at their disposal and weren't trapped under bond amounts they cannot pay. This is the reality despite the County's statutory and constitutional obligations to timely indict people and to not incarcerate people because of their poverty.

Before this Commission sanctions the siphoning of \$2 billion from taxpayer pockets, it should first attempt to alleviate the jails' injustices by demanding that the County follow the law. During the most active months of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw this County act swiftly to reduce the population in its jails. It can and must do so again. This Commission must take action and release people in the County's jails who are locked up because they are poor, or because they have a misdemeanor charge, or because they have not been timely indicted.

Mr. Thompson had been incarcerated for three months at the time of his death, for a misdemeanor. He remained in jail for as long as he did simply because he could not afford his \$2500 bond. In other words: He remained in jail for months, and ultimately died, because he was poor. This Commission has the obligation—and the opportunity—to make sure this never happens again.

We urge this Commission to hold the County accountable to the law and to its legal obligations and alleviate overcrowding by releasing people who are unduly languishing in its inhumane and life-threatening jails. People with only a misdemeanor charge, those who have not been timely indicted, and those being held on account of their poverty must be released immediately.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Cory Isaacson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Cory" being more prominent.

Cory Isaacson  
Legal Director, ACLU of Georgia