

SENATE OF CANADA

Senators Statements' – October 2, 2020

Mental Health—Systemic Bias

Hon. Peter M. Boehm: Honourable senators, I would like to support the statement that Senator Ataullahjan just made on the importance of the IPU and wish her well in her candidacy.

Honourable senators, I rise today to speak about the case of Soleiman Faqiri who died in a segregation unit at the Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, Ontario on December 15, 2016.

He was allegedly beaten to death by prison guards. In August, however, the Ontario Provincial Police announced that, in concluding the investigation it began in January 2019, none of the guards would face criminal charges. This is another tragic turn in a case that has been full of tragic turns, colleagues.

Soli, as he is known to the family that loves him and continues to fight for some justice for him, was a young man living with schizophrenia. After a car accident at 18, Soleiman was diagnosed and as a result, he left his studies at the University of Waterloo and subsequently had run-ins with the police.

On December 4, 2016, at age 30, he allegedly attacked a neighbour but, despite his serious mental illness, he was taken to a correctional centre instead of a mental health facility. Soleiman was found dead in his cell 11 days later after a violent altercation with several guards. He had been shackled, face down, and had a spit hood over his head.

While the coroner's report did not cite a cause of death, it did find that Soleiman suffered 50 instances of blunt-impact trauma.

Almost four years later, justice for Soli is still proving elusive. Two investigations — the first by local police in Kawartha Lakes and the second by the OPP — laid no charges, stating that it was impossible to trace the actions or inaction of each guard. Soleiman's case revealed a complete failure to properly assess and care for a man dealing with severe mental illness.

Further, with the heightened awareness of police brutality against racialized Canadians — the Faqiri family is originally from Afghanistan — the OPP's refusal to hold accountable those responsible for Soli's death is a devastating example of systemic racism in both our correctional and law enforcement systems.

Led by his brother Yusuf, Soleiman's family has been fighting for justice since his death and will continue despite this most recent setback. I have been honoured to work with the family alongside our colleague Senator Pate.

While we consider the systemic problems that contribute to this tragedy, we must also remember the human element: that a family lost its beloved son and brother. When the system fails one of us, dear colleagues, it fails all of us. This is Canada. We can and we must do better. Thank you.