

OUR VIEW

A tragedy beyond comprehension

It is very hard to read about the death of Thomas Valva, the facts are so horrific, so completely and utterly inhuman. The cruelty is unimaginable. This 8-year-old boy died Jan. 17 on the garage floor at his father's house in Center Moriches. Outside temperatures hovered below 20 degrees. The boy died of hypothermia.

It of course doesn't grasp the full truth of this nightmare to say the boy suffered from the cold. It was a form of torture, as was his knowledge as he lay dying that he was being forced to spend the night in the unheated garage by his own father, NYPD officer Michael Valva, and the senior Valva's fiancée, Angela Pollina.

Mr. Valva, 40, and Ms. Pollina, 42, have been charged with second-degree murder in the boy's death, along with multiple counts of endangering the welfare of a child. The latter charges also include Thomas' 10-year-old brother, Anthony.

Newsday broke a story last weekend that was almost too painful to read. It showed all the ways Thomas' mother, Justyna Zubko-Valva, had tried to save her son in the years leading up to Jan. 17. She knew the boy's father was a monster, and she begged for help from multiple authorities, according to the Newsday account — "from police, county social services agencies and the courts in Nassau and Suffolk." She also wrote a 75-page letter to U.S. Attorney General William Barr asking for his help.

She went from office to office, courtroom to courtroom, asking for assistance that never came. Two years ago, a judge rescinded Ms. Zubka-Valva's custody of Thomas, Anthony and their brother Andrew, who at 6 is her youngest child. Her children were now completely in the hands of their father, with their mother off on the sidelines, the legal system fully backing him and discounting her.

Go back and read the Newsday story by Nicole Fuller, Michael O'Keefe and Craig Schneider to see how the reporters reviewed thousands of pages of documents in both counties, along with Child Protective Services reports and documents from the East Moriches school district, where Thomas was a third-grader. The facts are just horrific — from Thomas and Anthony coming to school "dirty, hungry and with bruises," to the father's house being falsely depicted in court as a place of happiness. What a farce.

These facts constitute an overwhelming indictment of multiple agencies. Clearly, the overall system failed at an epic level to protect this child. Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini is investigating how Thomas's case was handled by the legal and social services network. He would be right to convene a special grand jury to examine it in depth, to put people under oath and to let the chips fall where they may.

Last weekend, some 50 people gathered in a Riverhead parking lot near the county Department of Social Services. They marched west up Main Street, carrying signs demanding justice for Thomas. Among them was Thomas's mother, who hugged and kissed everyone for supporting her. For her, the road ahead will be one of excruciating sadness and loss, but hopefully one that ends with a full accounting of who is responsible, in addition to the father and his fiancée.

Perhaps the worst punishment for Michael Valva would be to spend the rest of his life in a small prison cell thinking about how he murdered his own son. The death penalty, which technically doesn't exist in New York State for even the most extreme crimes, would seem to be the easy way out for this couple. Beyond punishing them, we as a society, we as taxpayers in one of the nation's most heavily taxed areas, need to know exactly who failed this boy, and why. If these agencies can't protect a child — what are they good for?

YOUR VIEW

MATTITUCK

Making everyone proud

We are so very proud of and happy for Ansley Hanus ("This Mattituck girl is a champion," Feb. 13) and congratulate her as well as her parents and grandparents.

Hats off to all of the Hanus and Lizewski families. Way to go and "Never Give up the Ship."

Sharon Brooks

MATTITUCK

Rising sea levels are happening now

Our region, the Metro area, must face the reality of rising sea levels and the growing threats of terror-motivated attacks on the present interstate railroad infrastructure. To address the reality of both threats, the Northeast rail corridor should be redirected to bypass Manhattan's congested West Side and reconnect with the corridor by crossing Long Island Sound from eastern Suffolk County. Short and to the important point: public safety is always crucial in designing the present and future public mass transportation infrastructure systems. All for the common good. Without a vision, the people suffer!

Jack McGreevy

CUTCHOGUE

51st state

The population of Nassau and Suffolk counties in New York are more than 15 other states plus Washington, D.C. New York's political base and controlling political representatives emanate from the state's largest cities (NYC, Albany, Buffalo, Syracuse and Rochester). What a mess they've created over time.

Years ago there was talk of creating Peconic County. Heck, I say it's time to break away from New York's crony government and create the 51st state.

We would have more federal representation than 15 other states. We would also have more local control of matters increasingly not important to New York's imperial one-sided government.

We would be able to directly tackle the problems we all know need to be addressed — such as our roads, water, sanitation, shorelines, criminal justice, taxes, education — without the interference of political representatives not voted into office by Long Islanders.

We need a Declaration of Separation to end the mess here on Long Island, not a continuation of populist representatives that have little or no allegiance to where we live. I

see no other way to improve the lot of Long Island, as our elected state representatives have not been able to overcome bad legislation.

Bob Sittner

GREENPORT

Saving lives

Over 1,000 New Yorkers die annually as a result of overdosing on prescription opioids. Fortunately, Gov. Andrew Cuomo's signature on Senate Bill S4808 has paved the way for many New Yorkers to obtain medication-assisted treatment. Responsibility for the opioid epidemic lies partly with the health establishment, as opioids were aggressively marketed without an appropriate appreciation of their addictive properties. Senate Bill S4808 makes it easier for doctors in New York State to become MAT providers and thus provides evidence-based treatment to people who are addicted to opioids.

According to Dr. Lloyd Simon, an internal medicine practitioner at Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital, the authorization period for MAT used to be four days. During this waiting period, patients seeking treatment might not have been able to avoid opioids without MAT and turned back to illicit use, exposing themselves to a fatal overdose. In addition to revising this waiting period, S4808 expands access to MAT, as it allows physicians to prescribe MAT to 200 more patients than the previous legislation. S4808 ensures that patients with opioid addictions are treated in a similar way as people with other health conditions. After all, people who have other health conditions are not subject to waiting periods or faced with prescribers who are legislatively unable to prescribe.

To be sure, there is a public health interest in ensuring that doctors are not lax with opioid prescriptions. However, there are well-established, evidence-based guidelines about the use of opioids for pain management as well as addiction recovery. We should not be conditioned to believe that the solution to the opioid epidemic is to curtail the use of opioids in clinical contexts. Curtailing opiate prescriptions will only compel thousands of people to substitute street drugs for prescribed opioids. Instead, legislation such as S4808 allows physicians to make medically responsible decisions around opioid usage in clinical contexts like addiction treatment. Mr. Cuomo should be praised for having signed S4808, as it will save lives by expanding treatment.

Ashley Price

The author is a second-year master's student at Stony Brook University's School of Social Welfare whose current field placement is in the detox unit at Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital.