

Lawsuit details Metro station ordeal of disabled man who was trapped for days

Rashawn Williams, who has Down syndrome, was missing for six days when he was found alone in the dark at a Maryland Metro station.

By Dan Morse

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A breakdown of basic safety procedures inside a Maryland Metro train station allowed a man with Down syndrome to wander into a dark emergency exit corridor and become trapped there for six days, alone with no food or water, according to a federal lawsuit filed by the man's family that a judge ruled this week can continue toward trial.

Rashawn Williams, 33, survived the 2023 ordeal but has grown fearful of the dark, has trouble sleeping and is prone to unprovoked outbursts, according to the suit against the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA).

The authority's recent effort to dismiss the suit, arguing among other claims that Williams had become a "trespasser," was rejected in a 10-page memorandum issued Tuesday by U.S. District Judge Paula Xinis.

"A modicum of basic communication with Williams to ensure he left the station safely can hardly be considered 'burdensome' to WMATA," Xinis wrote.

Williams, who is described by his family's attorneys as nonverbal and in need of 24-hour supervision, had made his way alone to the station the night of Oct. 20, 2023, after slipping away from his caregiver hours earlier. At the station, the lawsuit alleges, he walked to a kiosk "where he stood waiting for assistance." He did not receive any, according to the lawsuit, because the employee there was on a personal call.

"WMATA employees ignored Williams' clear signs of distress," Xinis wrote.

Williams eventually wandered through a door that locked behind him into an "Area of Refuge" (AOR), which was supposed to be checked daily.

By then, police and his family were frantically searching large areas for him.

"Shawnyboy!" his dad Jimmy Hall called over the next several days, often until 3 a.m.

"Shawnyboy!"

On Day 5, according to the lawsuit, Hall began the painful process of expanding his search to dumpsters and wooded areas. "I was searching for a body," he would later recall. "I was searching for my son's body."

The next day, a police officer searching the Glenmont station for Williams spotted the emergency exit, was led through it by a station manager and suddenly found Williams.

“Evidently, no Metro personnel inspected the AOR on the night Williams became trapped, or for six days thereafter,” wrote the judge, adding the italics for emphasis. “Williams had no light, water, food or toilet facilities. Montgomery County Police Department found Williams severely dehydrated and undernourished, ‘covered’ in his own urine and feces, with bugs nesting in his hair.”

A WMATA spokesperson said the authority does not comment on ongoing litigation.

The judge’s ruling does not mean she found WMATA negligent or that the case will ever get heard by a jury. And for the limited purpose of such motions-to-dismiss complaints, judges are required to view disputed facts in a light “most favorably” to plaintiffs.

But the ruling clears the way for attorneys representing Williams’s family to collect more documents and take depositions.

“The federal court’s opinion should be a wake-up call to WMATA, which has apparently learned nothing from what happened to Rashawn,” one of the attorneys, Timothy Maloney, told The Washington Post on Thursday. “As long as WMATA denies responsibility for disabled patrons like Rashawn, more tragedies are likely in the future.”

The lawsuit also names WeAchieve, the nonprofit agency responsible for monitoring Williams, as a defendant.

WeAchieve did not file a motion to dismiss the lawsuit, but in an earlier filing, the agency generally denied allegations of negligence or intentional misconduct and blamed WMATA for any injuries allegedly sustained by Williams, according to court records. Officials at WeAchieve and their outside attorney did not respond Thursday to requests for comment.

The lawsuit, which seeks unspecified damages, was filed by Williams’s father and stepmother, his legal guardians.

“He’s an angel,” Hall said in an earlier interview with The Post. “He loves to eat, he loves music, he loves to dance. He’s an absolute angel.”

For the first 20 years of Williams’s life, Hall said, Williams’s mother cared for him. When she died, Hall, who had to keep working, placed his son into a group home during the week. Around 2022, Hall said, a fire at the group home led to his son and others to be relocated to suites at a Residence Inn on the eastern edge of Montgomery County.

While there on Oct. 20, 2023, at about 6:20 p.m., Williams indicated to his caregiver — who was supervising three other people with disabilities — that he needed to use the bathroom, according to the lawsuit. While the caregiver went to get a key, Williams walked away, rode an elevator to the lobby, passed the front desk and walked to a bus stop, according to the lawsuit.

He boarded a bus. Police were called at 6:41 p.m. Williams’s parents were notified by WeAchieve at 7:39 p.m., the lawsuit states, and they quickly joined the search. At some point

that night, Williams got off the bus and rode at least one Metro train for several hours. Shortly after midnight, a train he was on pulled into the Glenmont station to stop its service for the night, according to the lawsuit.

A WMATA employee found Williams, who did not understand the train was out of service, and told him to get off but offered no further help, according to the lawsuit. Williams remained on the platform, visibly confused, and later approached the kiosk, according to station video cited by the lawsuit. He then made his way through the emergency exit door and into a second room near a stairway and ladder to the street, according to the lawsuit.

It was in that spot where the police officer found him. Another officer called Hall, who raced over and hugged his son.

In her opinion, Xinis cited WMATA directives as described in the lawsuit.

“Per WMATA’s written policies, personnel must inspect the AOR daily,” she wrote, “and must not take personal calls at the expense of assisting passengers.”

In asking for the lawsuit to be dismissed, WMATA attorneys argued that at some point at the station, Williams stopped being a Metro user, which affected their duties owed to him.

“Plaintiffs further fail to establish that Rashawn Williams was anything other than a trespasser when he reentered the station after service ended, that WMATA assumed an open-ended duty of care through brief employee interactions, or that WMATA denied him access to a public benefit by way of his disability,” they wrote.

Xinis didn’t agree. That Williams, she wrote in her opinion, “found himself in a room that WMATA calls an ‘area of refuge’ further suggests that passengers may very well have occasion to enter the room in an emergency. This is quite likely why Metro personnel are required to inspect the area every day.”