

# In Neptune Questions Raised About Arrest

By DON STINE

On Aug. 17 a 21-year-old woman was arrested by Neptune police for possession of drug paraphernalia. A few hours later she was found dead in her jail cell leaving many questions unanswered.

Supporters of Help Not Handcuffs showed up at this week's Neptune Township Committee meeting demanding police accountability for the tragic incident, a full investigation, and an end to drug criminalization.

"This needs to be a priority. This woman's young son is now

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## Questions

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orphaned and there are things you could do," said Randy Thompson, the organization's founder.

Help Not Handcuffs seeks to engage government on all levels to promote fact-based drug policies and remove arrest and coercion from the treatment of people with substance use disorders.

Katie Lee Thomas, of Efland, North Carolina and was visiting friends in New Jersey, was arrested on Aug. 17 for possession of drug paraphernalia and a disorderly person offense. She was taken to the Neptune police department and found unresponsive and not breathing in her jail cell a few hours later

Authorities performed CPR on Thomas before she was taken to Jersey Shore University Medical Center, where she was pronounced dead. She is the mother of a three-year-old son.

"Katie Lee was alive and well before failed drug criminalization policies forced her arrest for drug paraphernalia. Due to a complete lack of police oversight and accountability, there is no information about why this young mother is dead and there is no discussion about ridding the vio-

lent drug prohibition polices which killed her and ruin thousands of lives each year in New Jersey," Thompson said in a prepared statement.

The incident is currently under investigation by the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office.

"Ms. Thomas' loss is no less tragic today than it was in August when it occurred," said Mayor Kevin McMillan in a prepared statement read at the meeting. "Our thoughts and prayers continue to be with her family. While there is no reason to believe any wrongdoing occurred in the apprehension or confinement of Ms. Thomas, an appropriate investigation is underway by both our Internal Affairs Office and the Monmouth County Prosecutor's office.

"We believe that as with all investigations, this one should be conducted thoroughly, not quickly. Until this investigation is complete neither the Neptune Township Police Department nor the Township Committee will comment further."

Thomas was arrested about 10 a.m. and was being held in a holding cell at the Neptune Police Department for transport to the Monmouth County Correctional Institution in Freehold Township when she was found unrespon-

sive and not breathing. CPR was conducted in the cell block and Thomas was subsequently transported to Jersey Shore University Medical Center where she was pronounced at dead at 3:25 p.m.," Prosecutor's Office spokesman Charles Webster said in a prepared statement.

Thompson and others at Monday's meeting said that officials have yet to release any other details about Thomas' death or the specifics of her arrest, or if any force was used on Thomas prior to her death.

"You people have not been interested- not interested for months so people are starting to do things," said resident Dorothy Argyros, a longtime community activist. "You are passively sitting by waiting for something to happen to rectify the situation. We are trying to lead and you are not following. Show some interest in Karen Lee Thomas."

Help Not Handcuffs is calling for drug use/possession to be immediately decriminalized and that there needs to be more police oversight and accountability, particularly through the creation of civilian police review boards. It also calls for independent prosecutors to investigate police brutality and police sexual assault.