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**Public Defender Applauds Contempt Order Due to Health Officials' Disregard of  
Obligation to Admit Individuals Committed for Hospitalization**

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Today, Baltimore City Circuit Court Judge Gale Rasin held in contempt the Acting Secretary of Health and four other officials with the Maryland Department of Health (DOH) for failing to comply with court orders directing DOH to admit for psychiatric treatment defendants committed as incompetent to stand trial and dangerous.

“This is an important step in ensuring that life-saving mental health care is provided to especially vulnerable individuals in severe psychiatric distress,” said Mary Pizzo, OPD Supervising Attorney for Mental Health Litigation Support.

OPD initiated the contempt proceedings on behalf of eleven clients in Baltimore City who were ordered for commitment as incompetent to stand trial and dangerous, but languished in jail based on a purported lack of hospital bed space. In the decision issued today, Judge Rasin noted that each petitioner remained in jail for one to three months after being ordered for commitment, and she detailed as an example the impact on one petitioner, whose medical needs went unaddressed and whom jail doctors and staff repeatedly expressed concerns about his active psychosis.

“It is well understood that jail is a particularly dangerous setting that is likely to exacerbate psychoses,” Pizzo explained. “Utilizing jail space for individuals deemed incompetent by the court results in illegal punishment and long-term harm.”

Judge Rasin had held DOH in contempt in back August. Today’s ruling expanded that finding to the individual officials based on their failure to take actions that they either claimed to have taken but did not, or knew were needed but ignored. Today’s order noted “[t]he intentional delays attributable to the Respondents’ intentional acts and omissions have been unnecessary, avoidable and unreasonable.”

“The utter disregard shown by DOH and its top ranking officials to ensure the safety and well-being of committed individuals resulted in unconscionable harm to our clients, the court system, and ultimately the community,” said Pizzo. “Hopefully today’s ruling will finally result in the changes needed to ensure the provision of necessary services.”

The Court’s written order is available here:

<http://www.opd.state.md.us/Portals/0/Downloads/articles/contempt%20order.pdf>.

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