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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Tuesday, December 8, 2020

Legislative Committee Investigating Valva Case Appoints Special Counsel, Asks Public to Come Forward with Information

HAUPPAUGE, N.Y. – A special legislative committee has appointed outside counsel to help guide its investigation into the tragic death of young Thomas Valva and is encouraging members of the public with information about the case to come forward.

At its Nov. 17 meeting, the Suffolk County Legislature’s Special Legislative Committee to Investigate the Death of Thomas Valva appointed Lawrence Jay Braunstein, Esq., a partner in the law firm of Braunstein & Zuckerman, Esqs. in White Plains, to [serve as counsel](#) to aid committee members in their review of the events that led to the 8-year-old’s hypothermia death earlier this year. The boy’s father, Michael Valva, and the father’s fiancée, Angela Pollina, are facing murder charges and have been accused of child abuse and forcing the boy to sleep in a freezing garage.

Members of the public with information about the Valva case are asked to contact the special legislative committee by emailing valvacommittee@suffolkcountyny.gov.

“What happened to Thomas Valva is a terrible, heartbreaking horror that can never happen again. Conducting a thorough factfinding is the only way we as a county will be able to understand the systemic, policy or procedural issues that may have contributed to this tragedy,” said Suffolk County Legislature Presiding Officer Rob Calarco, who chairs the special legislative committee. “To that end, the committee is looking to the public to bring to our attention any pertinent information about the case, and to Mr. Braunstein to guide us on our independent investigation into the county’s interactions with the families involved. To have someone with Mr. Braunstein’s expertise will be vital to making sure the special legislative committee is asking the right questions of the right people.”

Mr. Braunstein has been practicing law for more than 35 years. He has extensive experience in the areas of child custody litigation and litigation involving allegations of child sexual and physical abuse in matrimonial, family and criminal cases. He has served on the faculty of the New York City Police Department Sex Crimes and Child Abuse Investigation Course since 1999

and on the faculty of the New York City Police Department Homicide Investigator Course since 2014. He serves as an adjunct professor at Hofstra University School of Law, where he teaches courses on modern divorce advocacy and child abuse and neglect.

Presiding Officer Calarco formed the special legislative committee in March with Deputy Presiding Officer Kara Hahn and the legislature's minority leader, Legislator Tom Cilmi. The committee, made up of the three legislative leaders, will establish a timeline of events, detail each incident in which the involved families had contact with a government agency or entity, and document the actions taken as a result of each encounter. The committee will also develop recommendations to prevent another tragedy from occurring again in Suffolk County.

"It's heartbreaking for me as a mother to know that Thomas Valva allegedly suffered at the hands of his parent," said Deputy Presiding Officer Hahn. "We have a responsibility to the residents of Suffolk County as their elected representatives to understand what happened in order to make an effective change. We owe it to the memory of Thomas Valva, to his siblings, to his mother and his family and friends to do all that we can to improve the system."

The special committee had initially appointed attorney Kevin J. Werner of the firm Long Timinello, LLP in Bay Shore to serve as counsel, but he had to withdraw due to his firm's conflict of interest in an unrelated case involving the county.

"It has been a long road getting to this point," said Legislator Cilmi. "We needed to make sure we engaged an attorney that is not in some way conflicted, but who has the experience and the passion necessary to assist us in getting all the answers and investigating all the different components of the tragedy that was Thomas Valva's life and death. This was indeed an arduous task, particularly given the challenges inherent during the coronavirus pandemic, but one that deserved commitment and perseverance. I am confident that we have found such a partner in Lawrence Braunstein. The road ahead will no doubt be longer, but it is a road we must travel. We owe it to Thomas Valva. We owe it to all the children who find themselves in a system which, by its very name, is designed to protect, but is sadly imperfect, that we endeavor to understand all that transpired in the Valva case and address system failures so that no child is left to endure the suffering and tragic death that Thomas Valva did."

For committee updates, visit <https://www.scnylegislature.us/1174/Special-Legislative-Committee---2020>.