

## Minnesota Safe Passage for Children Child Fatality Report 2023-2024

**Name of Child Victim:** Thomas Pauza-Moore

**County:** Pine County

**Date of Death:** 08/08/2023

**Date of Birth:** 08/27/2019

**Age:** 3 years

**Adult Perpetrator:** Father

**Abuse type:** Neglect (unsafe firearm storage)

**Summary:** On August 8, 2023, first responders answered a call which alleged that four year old Thomas Pauza-Moore shot himself in the head with an unsecured firearm in his father's bedroom. Thomas died at the scene, where police spotted a semi-automatic pistol on top of an unlocked gun safe. Inside the gun safe, police found various kinds of ammunition. In an interview with police, Thomas' father stated that he was downstairs playing video games while Thomas was watching movies on his father's phone upstairs in the bedroom. Thomas' father said Thomas most likely knocked over the gun safe, a problem that had occurred previously. The autopsy confirmed that a gunshot wound to the head was the cause of death.

In the criminal complaint, police mention that the floors and counters of the home were dirty, there were holes in the sheetrock, and that alcohol containers were on the kitchen counter and desk. Along with the unlocked gun safe, police found an unloaded semiautomatic rifle and a loaded pump shotgun in a closet accessible to Thomas.

Two days after the death, police talked to Thomas' mother, who was recently separated from Thomas' father. She stated that Thomas' father commonly left unsecured firearms around the home and that she had previously told him to secure them out of their children's reach. Despite this, Thomas' mother did not request sole custody of her children in the parents' divorce proceedings, which were filed a few days before Thomas' death and granted two months later. At the time of writing, both parents share physical and legal custody of Thomas' younger sibling. In the CHIPS petition for Thomas' younger sibling after Thomas' death, Thomas' mother reported that she was worried about her ability to financially support her child without Thomas' father's help and expressed a desire for the younger sibling to have a continued relationship with the father.

Thomas' father was charged with two counts of Second-Degree Manslaughter, one count of Child Endangerment by Firearm Access, and one count of Negligent Storage of Firearms. He pleaded guilty to Child Endangerment and received 150 days in jail, staggered in two parts. Thomas' father served the first 90 days and then filed with the court to have the second sentence forgiven. At the time of writing, the court order is not in Minnesota Court Information System (MNCIS) and there are no further entries into MNCIS; it appears his second sentence was forgiven.

### **Previous History:**

Thomas' family had multiple contacts with Pine County Health and Human Services (PCHHS) before Thomas' death. In March 2020, in response to a well-child visit, Thomas' primary care provider reported that Thomas' family was overfeeding Thomas. After that report until at least late 2021, Thomas' family was working with Pine County Public Health Family Home Visiting (PCPHFHV), a voluntary program that helps support families with young children. Thomas' mother was also receiving individual therapy. In July 2021, Thomas' family was referred to the Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP)<sup>36</sup> in response to a report of domestic violence between Thomas' parents whereby Thomas' mother was physically assaulted by Thomas' father in front of Thomas. Thomas' family did not engage in PSOP. In October 2021, there was a report of negligent supervision by Thomas' father. He was asleep when he was supposed to be watching the children<sup>37</sup> which was discovered by a public health worker who visited the home. Thomas' mother was not concerned about the two children, saying that Thomas' father would be able to hear them if they needed anything. Thomas' family did not receive more services in response to the report.

Thomas' family history shows Thomas' father is an unsafe caregiver, exhibiting a pattern of neglectful supervision and domestic violence. Pine County had multiple opportunities to recognize and address these concerns before Thomas' death. For example, loaded firearms may have been visible during home visits. After the July 2021 report, PSOP was offered to the family, but they did not engage. One Legal SME suggested that proactive follow-up with families in such situations could help prevent future tragedies. Similarly, after the report of negligent supervision, both CAC and Children's Mental Health SMEs identified the county's lack of intervention as a missed opportunity to provide Thomas' father with additional services, education, and support before circumstances worsened.

As a victim of domestic abuse, Thomas' mother was seemingly unable to identify that her husband was dangerous for their children. Multiple SMEs commented that the county should have recognized that Thomas' mother needed support in managing or escaping the relationship, especially since she was financially dependent on Thomas' father.