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MACOMB TWP.

## **Kukla to get psych care**

**Family says life in prison doesn't mean treatment for killer mom**

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BY AMBER HUNT

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These days, Jennifer Kukla rocks quietly in her chair. She cries constantly. And if it weren't for the psychotropic drugs she's now taking, there's no telling if she'd again be capable of the horrific violence that landed her in prison.

That's the picture her father painted Wednesday in Macomb County Circuit Court, where Kukla was sentenced to life in prison for fatally stabbing her two young daughters because, she said, she heard voices.

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Through tears, Joseph Kukla told Macomb County Circuit Judge Edward Servitto that a mandatory life without parole sentence for his daughter was really a death sentence.

"We fear she will not get mental help, and without it, she will not live," he said.

Some in the legal and medical community say his fears are warranted.

"Prisons aren't great places to get mental health treatment," said Paul Toro, a professor of psychology at Wayne State University.

Neil Rockind, a Southfield defense lawyer, agreed: "She'll be locked up, she'll be treated as a pariah, she'll have no chance at parole, and she won't get the treatment she needs."

But Russ Marlin, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections, said the state's prisons have plenty of practice treating mentally ill inmates, who represent 25% of the system's population.

"We have thousands and thousands of prisoners who get mental health treatment every day," he said. "She'll be given comprehensive treatment."

A jury last month found Kukla, 31, guilty but mentally ill for stabbing 8-year-old Alexandra and 5-year-old Ashley in the throat Feb. 4 in their Macomb Township mobile home.

Kukla told investigators that she heard voices saying they were coming for the children, so she killed them to save them. After the slayings, she told police that she'd waited for a car made of bones to take her to hell.

Macomb County Prosecutor Eric Smith said Kukla knew what she was doing was wrong as she chased down the children.

"She has not heard these voices since the day of these murders and has been since that time living as normally as any other prisoner behind bars," Smith said.

Steve Freers, Kukla's lawyer, argued at trial that she was legally insane when she committed the crimes. That argument was bolstered by the testimony of three forensic psychologists -- including one hired by prosecutors.

Kukla is appealing her conviction. Toro said it'd be difficult to overturn the conviction.

"The defense has to prove that she didn't know what she was doing," he said. "How can you have proof of this?"

States began adding the verdict guilty but mentally ill after John Hinckley's attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

Hinckley was acquitted by reason of insanity. Public outrage prompted some states to drop the insanity defense altogether. Michigan and other states added the option of a guilty but mentally ill conviction.

Freers said that the jurors, who deliberated for just over three hours before reaching the verdict, likely assumed that Kukla would get adequate mental health treatment in prison. Judges don't tell jurors the sentences attached to verdicts so they won't be swayed by the consequences of their decisions.

Kukla will be evaluated within 10 days after her transfer from the Macomb County Jail to the

Robert Scott Correctional Facility in Plymouth, Marlin said.

Rockind said the treatment won't be as effective as a facility dedicated to treating mental illness.

"It's not exactly the Mayo Clinic or a rolling estate with green lawns and a day room," he said. "With the treatment she's likely not to get, I don't expect her to get better anytime soon."

Servitto had no discretion in the sentencing. He said he was concerned with Kukla's drug abuse, which her lawyer acknowledged during trial.

Kukla interrupted him: "Really, the only problem was alcohol."

That was her only comment during the trial or sentencing, save answering the judge with "yes, sirs."

Addressing the court as his daughter sobbed before sentencing, Joseph Kukla wept and said the family misses Alexandra and Ashley terribly.

"We will leave court today to go to the cemetery and put down flowers, and tell them their mom and all of us miss and love them," he said.

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