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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE September 16, 2004

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Sheriff Sheahan Should Take Aggressive Action to End Jail Abuses: MacArthur Justice Center

(Chicago) Sheriff Michael Sheahan must immediately offer the public an explanation for why and how jail beatings occurred on his watch and outline the steps he plans to take to end jail abuse, said Locke Bowman, legal director for the MacArthur Justice Center. Bowman was responding to a grand jury report released today that found that Cook County sheriff staff abused inmates in 1999. Bowman called the findings from the grand jury “serious,” and “disturbing.”

“The grand jury found that criminal misconduct occurred on Sheriff Sheahan’s watch. Jail employees not only engaged in physical abuse of prison inmates, but jail officials responsible for investigating allegations covered up evidence of the beatings and attempted to change findings of an internal investigator,” Bowman said.

“The grand jury has called for the criminal prosecution of the jail guards that were involved. This is serious stuff. The grand jury report is being forwarded to the Cook County State’s Attorney Office and the Office of the U.S. Attorney. It contains a blueprint for the criminal prosecution of those involved. Those agencies should act aggressively on these recommendations.

“Sheahan is responsible for the actions of his employees. He needs to take responsibility and make it clear to the public that he is going to take the recommendations of the grand jury seriously.

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“One obvious lesson from this report is that when inmates complain about physical abuse, they may actually have been abused. In 1999, inmates complained of abuse and there is plenty of evidence to back them up, including a report by an internal investigator. Instead of looking into and rectifying the situation, Cook County Sheriff’s staff attempted to cover up, withhold information and alter the report. This is a very disturbing pattern of behavior.

“Professionalism at the jail starts at the top. The report recommends that the Sheriff’s Department establish a procedure for inmates to make grievances and a method for investigating those grievances. Jail personnel must be trained to do their job in a professional manner. We expect these recommendations to be taken seriously by the Cook County Sheriff’s office.”

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