

1 dead, 22 hurt in shootout - Gang dispute - South Jersey Times (NJ) - June 18, 2018 - page A1

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Trenton

A burst of violence that injured 22 people at a community arts festival in Trenton on Sunday morning — including 17 people who were shot — began when people started shooting one another in what appears to have been a gang-related dispute, authorities say.

Tahaji Wells, 33, was shot and killed by police after allegedly exchanging fire with at least two other suspects at the Art All Night event, Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo Onofri said during a news conference Sunday evening. The other suspected gunmen remained hospitalized, Onofri said.

Prior to the shooting, fights broke out inside and outside Roebling Wire Works, where the annual event was held. Police attempted to disperse the crowd and urged the organizers to shut down the festival, Onofri said.

“Those individuals continued to loiter and additional fights broke out, and then the shooting occurred,” Onofri said, noting the suspects first shot at each other before police opened fire.

Onofri said two other suspects, Amir Armstrong and another he did not identify, were in the hospital in critical and stable condition, respectively. He did not detail the charges facing the two.

Two other people who were in critical condition Sunday — including a 13-year-old boy shot in the melee — were listed in stable condition Sunday afternoon, Onofri said.

Seventeen people were taken to Capital Health Regional Medical Center in Trenton, spokeswoman Kate Stier said. Some were released later Sunday.

It is possible that some victims were injured by cops’ bul

lets as officers were shooting at the suspects, officials said. How many shots were fired in all is still under investigation, they said.

Gov. Phil Murphy made a brief visit to Capital Health Regional Medical Center, where many of the shooting victims were taken Sunday. He also spoke during a Sunday service at the Galilee Baptist Church in Trenton, where the governor offered words of encouragement and prayers to the community.

“We can rise above this,” he told those in attendance.

The event, billed as “24 hours of community, creativity, and inspiration” and held at the historic Roebling Wire Works building on South Clinton Avenue, turned to chaos shortly before 3 a.m. An estimated 1,000 people were at the event at that hour.

People ran from the event into nearby streets as police descended on the building and alternately looked for shooters and treated victims.

Irvin Higgenbotham, a resident who said he comes to the event every year, said he was walking inside the event with his bike when he heard the shots going off.

“It was like, pow, pow, pow and then I was laying down on the ground,” he said.

A bullet struck his leg, he said, and a woman who was at the event helped him until he was able to be treated. Higgenbotham returned to the scene of the shooting at about 8:45 a.m. Sunday, after being released from the hospital, to find out what happened, and how he got caught in the middle of the shooting, he said.

Onofri described a chaotic and confusing scene early on: Trenton police were swamped with 911 calls reporting a shooting inside the venue, and the first police officers on scene radioed they needed critical assistance and backup.

Trenton police were working off-duty security at the event, and there were no metal detectors inside the building, authorities said. The event occurs both inside and outdoors.

Authorities said Wells was carrying a handgun with an extended magazine — a gun that is illegal to possess in New Jersey. It was one of several guns recovered at the scene.

According to authorities, Wells was sentenced in 2004 to 18 years in state prison after pleading guilty to aggravated manslaughter in the fatal shooting of 22-year-old Robert McNair during a dispute over who should drive a car Wells had driven from a local bar. Wells was 17 at the time of McNair’s killing, authorities said.

Records show that in 2010, Wells — still serving time for the 2002 killing — was sentenced to six more years after pleading guilty to a second-degree racketeering charge following a prosecution by the state Attorney General’s Office.

In that case, state prosecutors said Wells had helped David “Duke” Allen, the imprisoned leader of the Bloods’ Nine Trey Gangsters faction, run his gang from behind bars. The Attorney General’s Office has described Wells as an alleged Bloods gang member.

He was released in February, records show.

A search of state court records did not show any prior felony convictions for Armstrong, one of two surviving alleged gunmen.

Witnesses who spoke to NJ Advance Media say they heard shots fired inside the building first before the gunfire migrated outside.

"I'm still in shock, all that happened all around me," said Edward "NJ Weedman" Forchion, who was at the event Saturday night and took videos of the scene.

He said he was passing out fliers and taking photos when "all hell broke loose." Forchion said he heard 26 shots. The gunfire started inside the building and then continued outside, he said.

"There were people that fell and people stepped over them, people that ran into cars, people were scrambling," he said.

Videos posted on social media Sunday showed police and attendees huddling behind cars and helping the wounded. Maurice Lennon, 31, said he wanted to get one last look at art in the building with his friend early Sunday when he heard gunfire.

"We heard the first shots ring out inside the art gallery. The first shot, then the second shot before it resonated that: Wow that's gunfire," Lennon, of Trenton said in a phone interview Sunday. "You saw the doors bust open, everyone starting running out and panicking. I ended up getting tripped and fell and I ended up crawling."

Lennon said he has cuts on his legs and arms from crawling and being stepped on by other people.

"I've gone to this event for several years. I've been going for the past several years, never anything like this," Lennon said. "I've always bragged that this is Trenton's best event ... it's always peaceful. I've always felt safe."

NJ Advance Media staff writers Bill Duhart, Karen Yi and Thomas Moriarty contributed to this report.

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