

Police-involved fatality raises questions - South Jersey Times (NJ) - July 17, 2018 - page A4

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editorial

It's happened again. A man was shot to death last weekend by police after a controversial confrontation.

Actually, it happened twice. One time, it happened in Chicago, in an incident that garnered national media attention.

The other time, it happened in Vineland, in an incident that barely made the local TV news.

Why the broad scrutiny for one event and nearly no notoriety for the other? That seems to defy explanation, except that Chicago is a big city with a reputation for severe street violence.

Yet, the Vineland fatality seems to be the one, on the face of it, that should generate more questions.

In Chicago, police released body-cam video of the circumstances in which Harith Augutus, 37, lost his life. Authorities hoped the video release would quell ongoing protests, since the footage appears to show the man with a gun and an ammunition magazine in his waistband.

No such weapon-related assertion has been made officially about Saturday morning's situation in Vineland. The deceased was later identified as Rashaun Washington, 37, of Bridgeton.

Witnesses say Washington, shirtless and holding a bottle of water, had been pacing around some homes and near police cars that had responded. Described as agitated, the man supposedly said something like, "I'm not leaving, you're gonna have to kill me," Three shots rang out, and Washington was dead.

The police-involved fatality is one of several recent ones in South Jersey. The number would be sparking more concern if they'd all occurred in Chicago or another large city.

In April, police shot and killed **Jose Pietri**, 55, of Pennsville, who was being pursued in a murder investigation out of Winslow Township. The incident occurred in Millville, with Winslow police also involved.

Early this year, use of deadly force by police was declared justified in the case of Darryl Fuqua, 23, who was killed Feb. 10, 2017, by a Bridgeton officer. A state review of a Cumberland County investigation agreed that the officer acted in self-defense.

In early June, Deptford Township police killed shoplifting suspect LaShanda Anderson, 36, of Philadelphia. Authorities say she tried to run over two officers with her SUV as she attempted to flee a shopping center. There is no police body-camera footage of this incident.

The Anderson case, like the others, sparked protests from family members, but groups that are routinely suspicious of police-involved shootings have been fairly quiet. Gloucester County NAACP President Loretta Winters, after meeting with Gloucester County Prosecutor Charles Fiore, said she had confidence that the ongoing investigation would be thorough.

And, returning to Vineland, police were ultimately cleared in the April 2016 shooting of Richard Baird Jr., because he had allegedly tried to shoot at a city officer.

The optics surrounding Saturday's shooting seem different. They're consistent with cases in which someone with a mental illness or a psychological problem ends up dead after interacting with police.

There have been great advances in training and procedures when police believe they're engaging with someone who shows signs of being disturbed. Only a complete investigation can determine whether Washington's death was a tragically missed opportunity to use best practices.

Meanwhile, it would be better if all police-involved fatalities were automatically probed by state authorities, not county prosecutors, whose conclusions always generate cries that investigators are "too close" to the police departments and officers involved.

Last month alone, police across New Jersey shot and killed four people.

We're still waiting for lawmakers to enact this long-proposed reform, as the number of incidents grows.

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