

Sometimes it takes tragedy to bring about a change

Publication info: The Greenville News ; Greenville, S.C. [Greenville, S.C]24 June 2018: E.2.

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FULL TEXT

It is impossible to watch the video of Jermaine Massey's shooting by Greenville County Sheriff's deputies and not feel compassion for everyone involved.

Massey was clearly in emotional distress when he called sheriff's deputies to his Greenville home in March, fearful that he might hurt himself or family members. What followed was a tense standoff between Massey –who refused to drop a knife he was holding –and deputies urging him to surrender the weapon.

After what seemed like an eternity, Massey was shot to death when he lunged toward one of the deputies. After an internal investigation and an investigation by the state's top law enforcement division, the officers were cleared of any wrongdoing.

The tragedy underscores the need for more training of law enforcement officers in how to deal with suspects suffering from mental illness.

The four deputies involved in the shooting had not taken Crisis Intervention Team training, which is provided by the National Alliance of Mental Illness, according to a report by Daniel Gross of The Greenville News. CIT training is an extensive week-long class that helps officers recognize the signs of mental illness and gives them strategies to deal with suspects suffering from mental health issues. It is offered by the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Though we'll never know for certain, local mental health advocate Paton Blough believes the outcome may have been different if the officers involved had taken the 40-hour course. Blough is encouraged that the Greenville County Sheriff's Department has two classes scheduled in the coming months for deputies. One of the classes had been scheduled prior to Massey's death, he said.

Blough has seen the videotape of the shooting and believes the officers did the best they could under the circumstances. He said officers receive limited training in the police academy on dealing with mentally ill suspects.

During CIT training, officers learn to slow down –if possible –when dealing with a mentally ill suspect. By deploying tasers in Massey's direction, the standoff was escalated. Officers learn ways to de-escalate their interaction with suspects in CIT classes. They are also encouraged to redirect the suspect's attention away from the standoff and on to other things, such as relationships with family members.

"You can never 100 percent say what would have happened," said Blough. "But I feel fairly strongly there could have been a different outcome had those officers received the training."

Interim Greenville County Sheriff Johnny Mack Brown seems committed to ensuring that more deputies receive the training, said Blough.

Further, Sheriff's Brown's release of the video of the shooting shows his commitment to running a department that is transparent in its dealings with the public. While the video is difficult to watch, the deputies can be seen behaving in a professional manner, urging the suspect to drop his weapon and attempting to use a taser gun to temporarily disable Massey.

Sometimes, it takes a tragic incident to bring about change. If we learn anything from Massey's death, it is that police officers need all the training they can get when it comes to interacting with suspects suffering from mental illness. Such training will give officers more confidence to take on the difficult jobs they do daily.

Dr. U.A. Thompson speaks for the family of Jermaine Massey during a press conference outside the Greenville County courthouse June 15 to respond to the news that the solicitor has cleared the deputies involved from any wrongdoing in the shooting death of Massey.

BART BOATWRIGHT/greenville news

DETAILS

Subject:	Sieges; Shootings; Sheriffs; Criminal investigations; Law enforcement; Mental health care; Mental disorders
People:	Brown, Mack
Company / organization:	Name: National Alliance on Mental Illness; NAICS: 813319
Publication title:	The Greenville News; Greenville, S.C.
First page:	E.2
Publication year:	2018
Publication date:	Jun 24, 2018
column:	editorial
Section:	Opinion
Publisher:	Gannett Co., Inc.
Place of publication:	Greenville, S.C.
Country of publication:	United States, Greenville, S.C.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Editorial
ProQuest document ID:	2058298810
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/2058298810?accountid=14026
Copyright:	Copyright 2018 - THE GREENVILLE NEWS - All Rights Reserved.
Last updated:	2018-08-06
Database:	Global Newsstream

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