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Aurora police killed a grandfather defending his home. Now his family seeks more mental health support for cops. 'I can't imagine how it is for law enforcement that has to face these situations every day.'

State Capital Newsfeed

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Body

Feb 07, 2019(Colorado Independent: <http://coloradoindependent.com/Delivered> by Newstex) <https://www.coloradoindependent.com/2019/02/07/aurora-black-limbaugh-office-involved-shooting/> On June 27, Aurora police officer Drew Limbaugh fired 11 bullets into an armed man during an exchange in a dark parking lot of a hotel on East Colfax Avenue. The suspect, Joey Bronson, died, and Limbaugh was later ruled justified in the shooting. Three weeks later, Limbaugh was back on patrol, and two weeks after that, he found himself responding to a north Aurora home invasion.

A 26-year-old man had burst into the home and attacked an 11-year-old boy inside. By the time Limbaugh and other police arrived, the boy's grandfather, **Richard Gary Black**, had already shot and killed the intruder, Dajon Harper. Limbaugh, a three-year Aurora officer who works the graveyard shift, would later tell investigators he heard shot rings out just before an armed man in a bathrobe came into his sight. The man was Black, a decorated Army veteran whose service left him hard of hearing, and who, his family has said, was disoriented because he'd been hit in the head while protecting his family from the intrusion. But Limbaugh didn't know any of that when he repeatedly shouted for Black to drop his gun, then fired four bullets at him believing, investigators said, that Black posed an 'imminent' threat. Black died about two hours later in surgery. He was 73[1]. The incident captured on body camera footage[2] Aurora PD released in December quickly made national news[3]. It's been about six months since Black was killed and, his widow Jeanette said this week, 'The loss, to each member of our family, is unbearable.' In that time, there have been at least 14 officer-involved shootings[4] in Colorado, according to the Denver Post. 'I have two grandchildren who will no longer enter my home, out of fear,' Black said. 'They think that bad people are still searching for them and are going to kill them yet. I'm alone now and miss my husband so tremendously.' Black, flanked by her daughters, was testifying Monday before the Colorado Senate's State, Veterans and Military Affairs Committee. But the Black family had come to the committee hearing not because they wanted to revisit the incident, but rather to support a piece of legislation they believe can help officers like Limbaugh. Tragedy prompts legislation The tragedy at the Black house also took a toll on Limbaugh, Aurora Police Chief Nick Metz said. 'He is incredibly heartbroken over this situation,' Metz said[5] in a press conference three days after the shooting. Following both of Limbaugh's fatal shootings, Aurora police put him through their protocol[6] for what they refer to as 'critical incidents.' In these cases, Aurora officers are automatically put on paid administrative leave for at least five days and sent to one mandatory appointment with a psychologist, according to the department's guidelines. Aurora's protocol exceeds the required standards laid out by the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Limbaugh's current mental state is not clear. The Aurora police department's internal investigation into his shooting of Black is ongoing, but the Adams County district attorney declined to file charges. Limbaugh declined, through a spokeswoman, to be interviewed for this story. He remains with the department, albeit in a non-patrol role. For the Black family, the tragedy raised a troubling question: Had Limbaugh received more or better mental health treatment after the first fatal shooting, would **Richard Gary Black** be alive today? The bill for which the Blacks testified was introduced by Sen. Rhonda Fields, an Aurora Democrat. It would

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require that law enforcement agencies in Colorado develop policies to provide mental health support to officers involved in shootings or other fatal incidents. There's no mandate for how these policies would be written, other than that they'd have to 'address pre-incident training and preparation, support for the officer at the scene of the incident, post-incident support and services, guidelines for temporary leave or duty reassignment, and guidelines for return to duty.' Many larger and urban law enforcement agencies already have strict policies in place, but smaller departments may not, according to several who testified at the hearing. <https://www.coloradoindependent.com/newsletter/Fields> attended **Richard Gary Black's** funeral over the summer and she said her bill co-sponsored in the Senate by Republican John Cooke, a former Weld County sheriff was directly inspired by conversations with the Black family. 'I wouldn't be here presenting this bill if they hadn't brought it to my attention,' said Fields, who also lost family to gun violence; her son, along with his wife, was murdered in 2005. Elizabeth Black, Richard Gary's eldest daughter, told legislators at the hearing that she's convinced things might have turned out differently for her father had Aurora police taken a different approach with Limbaugh following the first of his two fatal shootings last summer. 'As a behavioral scientist myself, I can tell you, absolutely, post-traumatic stress was a part in that knee-jerk reaction he took, which ended my father's life,' Black said. Police Chief Metz in August addressed the fact that Limbaugh was back at work so soon after the officer's first fatal shooting. 'I know that sometimes questions come up. 'Was that too soon?' Metz said. 'We review each of these situations on how officers are involved in the shooting, and when they come back, on a case-by-case basis. The reality is we can't control what our officers are going to run into, whether it's ten days after a shooting or two years.' Elizabeth Black, in endorsing Fields' bill, said, 'If we allow these officers more of a chance to heal, if we give them more resources to be able to be better pillars for the community, that will in turn make our communities safer and it will help instill more respect for our boys in blue.' The family, which has retained an attorney, didn't attack Limbaugh or the Aurora Police Department, even as they called the officer's judgment into question. They spoke of their profound pain in the wake of the shooting, and implored the Senate committee to advance Fields' legislation. They did, in a 3-2 party-line vote. 'The suffering we've gone through, we just passed six months and still can't fully comprehend the magnitude of our loss,' said Catherine Black, the youngest daughter. 'I can't imagine how it is for law enforcement that has to face these situations every day. I think it's vital for them to have an ability to get the proper help they'd need so they can process and deal and get back to serving communities in a safe way.' Bill moves to the House Their testimony was backed up by statewide police and sheriff associations, as well as the state's foremost police psychologist, John Nicoletti. Remarks at the hearing from others in the law enforcement community indicated there is broad support for the bill, in part because it was written in such general terms that nothing specific or especially expensive is required of the departments, other than that they have to develop a policy if they don't already have one. Nicoletti told the committee there are 'seven or eight' police psychologists in the state, though there are of course many more mental health professionals. Shootings and other fatal officer-involved incidents, he said, 'all activate the part of the brain that deals with trauma.' 'What we're trying to do is help the officer process that' and prevent post-traumatic stress disorder, he said. The three Democrats who comprise the committee's majority were easily swayed. 'This is policy-making at its best,' said Sen. Lois Court of Denver, the committee vice chair. 'Citizens have brought a concern, for an extremely painful and horrific reason,' she added, turning to the Blacks. 'We appreciate so much that you are figuring out how to turn your tragedy into positive public policy, and it is our job to listen to our constituents when you bring issues like this forward.' Sen. Vicki Marble, a Fort Collins Republican, was skeptical. She and Sen. Jerry Sonnenberg, a Sterling Republican, voted against the bill. Marble said she's 'been texting for a year now' with a man suffering post-traumatic stress. The man, she said, has gotten counseling provided by the military. This service is 'just ridiculous' in its inadequacy, Marble said, advancing an argument that sometimes professional mental health providers can be less effective counselors to officers navigating trauma than, say, friends and colleagues. 'Some of the best support they've gotten is not from government, or psychologists,' she said. 'It's people on the outside, outside of government funding, who have lent that peer support and pathway to where they can deal with it.' Fields and Cooke explained to Marble that the bill doesn't prohibit that kind of non-professional support, but she wasn't sold. After their testimony, the Black family, visibly drained, said they hope the bill which unanimously passed in a vote on the Senate floor Thursday morning and now heads to the House brings attention to mental health issues among police. 'I think this will give the officers in the community the chance to have the confidence to do their job without feeling like they're hated,' Jeanette Black said. 'They'll be respected for going through some training, and knowing that there is strength if they need it.' [1]: <https://www.denverpost.com/2018/08/25/gary-black-funeral-killed-police/> [2]:

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJRQCrCXV8wt=87s> [3]:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/02/us/aurora-police-shooting-richard-black.html> [4]:
<https://www.denverpost.com/2019/01/30/colorado-officer-involved-shootings-map/> [5]:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YcQJzXJMTAt=73s> [6]:
<https://www.auroragov.org/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=9243268>

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