

Body-cam video shows suspect raising weapon - - St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN) - August 18, 2018 - page A1

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St. Paul police officers fatally shot a 43-year-old man after he raised a gun "in a sweeping fashion over the officers," Police Chief Todd Axtell said Friday as he released body camera footage of the incident.

Mayor Melvin Carter, along with some of **William James Hughes'** family and community members, had called for the release of the video in the Aug. 5 shooting. But the footage left some people with more questions.

Melissa Waukazo, Hughes' half sister, said she was angered when she saw the video.

"He did have a gun, but he did what they asked him to do and ... they still shot and killed him," she said Friday.

Hughes' sister, Libby Meyers, met with Axtell to view the footage before he publicly released it. She gave him two cards -- one for each of the officers involved. The police chief said he doesn't know what the cards say, but he intends to hand deliver them to the officers.

Axtell said what happened was a tragedy and added, "Our officers do not choose these situations. These situations choose our officers."

OFFICERS HEARD 'I WILL KILL YOU'

The confrontation with Hughes began after a 911 caller reported on Aug. 5 at 2:34 a.m.: "Multiple gun shots. 905 St. Anthony (Ave.) on the second floor" and then hung up, according to a transcript of the call released by police on Friday.

The 911 caller, a man who had been staying with Hughes, later told Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension investigators that Hughes fired two or three rounds into a bedroom wall and pointed a gun at his head, according to an affidavit for a search warrant filed in Ramsey County District Court this week. The 911 caller ran out of the building in the Summit-University neighborhood.

The first officers to arrive, Vince Adams and Matt Jones, entered an enclosed porch, Axtell said.

Adams knocked on an apartment door and a man could be heard saying, "I will kill you," Axtell reported Friday.

"A few seconds later, Mr. Hughes opens the door," Axtell said.

FOOTAGE BRINGS DIFFERING VIEWS

In the body camera footage, the officers can be heard repeatedly shouting, "Put your hands up!" when the door opens. After Hughes emerges from the doorway with a gun in his right hand, in audio that's more difficult to make out, an officer apparently shouts, "Put it down!"

Axtell said of the footage, "You will see Mr. Hughes begin to raise the gun in a sweeping fashion over the officers, who fired their service weapons."

Nekima Levy-Pounds, founder of Racial Justice Network, wrote on social media on Friday: "Do you agree with the official police narrative on what happened to Billy Hughes? This is highly disturbing to say the least."

She added later that the "mere presence of a gun (if that's what was in his hand) does not automatically pose a threat."

The BCA has said investigators recovered a gun at the scene.

From the perspective of the St. Paul police union, president Dave Titus said Friday: "We believe our officers involved acted heroically and are proud of them. This video is some of the evidence that demonstrates their professionalism and dedication to protecting innocent lives in our community."

Titus added in a statement, though, that he believes "the department should not have released this video outside of the context of a complete and thorough investigation. The officers, family, and society deserve the complete story and not a piecemeal release of evidence."

HUGHES PREVIOUSLY TALKED OF SUICIDE

Axtell said when he met with the family on Friday, they talked about Hughes' "kind heart, how much they miss him" and they shared stories of him, saying "that he was a good man, that he was in pain."

BCA agents interviewed Hughes' relatives after the shooting. Relatives said Hughes had a medical condition that was diagnosed as a terminal illness, according to a search warrant affidavit. Hughes also had contact with relatives by text message about four months earlier to say he was contemplating suicide, the affidavit said.

In a Friday statement, Carter called the body camera footage of Hughes' death "heartbreaking."

"A fatal officer-involved shooting is one of the toughest challenges a city can face," Carter said. "... All of St. Paul is united today in mourning Billy Hughes, and in wishing this terrible incident had never happened. As we process the range of emotions his death evokes, I remain committed to building community, and to ensuring our officers are equipped with the tools, resources, and trust they need to help us keep our neighborhoods safe."

INVESTIGATION IS CONTINUING

The BCA continues to have an open and active investigation into the case, a spokeswoman said

Friday.

Information from investigations into officer-involved shootings, including video footage, has traditionally been released in Minnesota after the probe is concluded.

Under Minnesota law, law enforcement agencies can release information to "promote public safety, or dispel widespread rumor or unrest."

Axtell said Friday that he's "heard the clarion call from some community members for the body-worn camera videos to be released, but what matters is the law."

He said he needed to answer the question of whether he could, in good conscience, release the videos before the investigation is complete.

He concluded the answer was "yes" because he said he has "watched people repeat widespread rumors, I have seen protesters in the street, and I know public angst can endanger our officers."

Axtell said he had also received word from the BCA that its agents had completed interviews with key witnesses.

Ramsey County Attorney John Choi said in a Friday statement that while the body camera footage "is one critical piece of evidence, it does not tell the entire story." He said his office will analyze all the evidence gathered by the BCA to decide whether the officers' use of lethal force was justified under the law.

"In the interest of speeding up our decision-making timeline, I have asked my team of prosecutors to conduct our prosecution review simultaneously with the BCA's investigation, which includes consulting independent use-of-force and police procedure experts," Choi wrote. He said the BCA has agreed to present his office with evidence as it collects it.

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