

Rashaun Washington's family sees support

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FULL TEXT

VINELAND –Community members gathered Thursday evening at the site where Rashaun Washington died in a weekend police-involved shooting, to comfort his family and call for action.

"We're not talking politics here. We are here as a community to support the family," community leader Josh Barreiro said. "What we're trying to do is put pressure to call for an outside investigation into the shooting –we also want better training for the law enforcement officers."

"This family is hurting," he told the crowd of about 50 people. "We feel their pain."

It was the second such gathering at the Boulevard and Wood Street since the shooting.

Washington's family tied a cluster of silver and blue balloons to a tree, just above a makeshift memorial of candles, bears and written tributes to the 37-year-old Bridgeton man.

To the chants of those assembled, they unfurled a banner calling for "Justice for Pac Man," a family nickname for Washington.

Family members voiced their frustration with the investigation since the July 14 shooting.

"I want them to start telling us something, give us some answers," Tiffany Washington said. "We want complete justice for my brother."

"He was a fun-loving person, he loved to play and joke around a lot," she said. "He loved his children, he loved his family."

Washington was the father of two children and stepfather to two others, she said.

The gathering, led by three generations of the Washington family, took to Wood Street to march about a block to the Vineland police station while chanting "No Justice, No Peace" and "Black Lives Matter,"

Along the way, they passed a group that gathered at the corner of Sixth and Wood streets to show their support for the police.

When the marchers arrived at the police station entrance, Steven Young, president of the South Jersey chapter of the National Action Network civil rights group, requested respect and support for the Washington family.

"We do understand that there are some problems in our community, but human beings' lives matter," Young said, setting off a chorus of "yes" cheers.

"This is the way the community mourns, in the street, peacefully and to get results," he said. "It's about transparency, accountability and access to the information to find out the truth of what's going on in Vineland as this point."

Many of those gathered, Young said, were local families who are raising children.

"We want to leave a legacy of peace and happiness, not mourning and not funerals, we are tired of it," Young said, acknowledging the recent death of a child by a stray bullet.

A 9-year-old Bridgeton girl, Jennifer Trejo, was struck by errant gunfire Tuesday as she slept in her home.

"It's very important if you know something, speak up," Young said.

For Barbara Jackson, 60, of Newfield, it was her first public protest. She made a sign and took a place in the circle around the family.

"It's all over Facebook," she said, noting those accounts of the shooting so close to home "motivated me to come on out."

"You just don't shoot without finding out what the problem is —what if that was my brother?" Jackson said.

She spoke with the outrage voiced by several at the rally.

"Stop killing black people for no reason at all," Jackson said, while holding out hope for the next generation "to love one another, I mean come on, we need peace. It's bad enough we've been at war with each other for centuries and it's senseless, just senseless. How would you feel in our skin?"

Mirabella Meotti, 41, of Vineland resides down the street from where the shooting unfolded and was familiar with Washington. She noted his behavior was unusual that day as he paced around.

"I'm hoping changes are made," she said. "I don't think the police should have shot him. They should have Maced him or used a baton or something."

The encounter gave Meotti a change of heart about calling the police for assistance if someone were on drugs.

"I would not call the police. I will try to find someone to take them to the hospital," she said.

The protest came just hours after the prosecutor's office released several videos, recorded by Vineland police body cameras, that show the events leading up to Washington's death.

A prosecutor's office statement said police responding to a report of a person "acting suspiciously" had an approximately 28-minute encounter with Washington during which he alluded to having an "explosive device" while holding something wrapped in a T-shirt.

After a Vineland officer fired his weapon at Washington and a K-9 was used in an attempt to "immobilize" him, police learned the item inside the T-shirt was actually a garden shear with an 8 1/4-inch blade, the prosecutor's office said.

Community leader Tracey Huggins called for "equitable justice.

Family of the late Rashaun Washington rally with other demonstrators on July 19 in Vineland.

Joe Lamberti/Courier Post

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