

911 Tape: 'Mental issue' possible; Officer called for backup just before fatal encounter. Dead man identified.

Laurie Mason Schroeder; Palochko, Jacqueline . Morning Call ; Allentown, Pa. [Allentown, Pa]31 July 2018: A.1.

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FULL TEXT

Lehigh County 911 dispatches about a man who allegedly interfered with traffic along Hamilton Boulevard before a South Whitehall officer shot and killed him Saturday night reveal the first officer on the scene called for backup for a possible "mental issue."

Authorities on Monday identified the dead man as 44-year-old Joseph Santos of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., but did not release other details.

An autopsy will be conducted today to determine the official cause and manner of death.

State police and the Lehigh County Homicide Task Force police are investigating the shooting that happened shortly before 6 p.m. on Hamilton Boulevard outside Dorney Park.

"I'm in front of the Comfort Suites with a possible, uh, mental issue here," the unidentified officer says on the 911 tape after he arrived at the scene. "Can I get another unit?"

At a community meeting Monday night in Center City Allentown, many people said because of the shooting, they would like to see police officers receive more de-escalation and mental health training.

"No crime is worthy of being shot five times in front of Ice Cream World and Dorney Park," said Jessica Ortiz, organizer of the meeting and Allentown resident.

About 30 people attended the forum, which centered around the shooting and what can be done in its aftermath.

Elected officials at the meeting included Allentown School Directors Cheryl Johnson-Watts and Phoebe Harris, Allentown Councilwoman Cynthia Mota and South Whitehall Commissioner Mark Pinsley.

Many parents of children who are black, Hispanic or have mental health issues, said they're concerned for their children going out in the community when they hear of shootings involving police officers.

"I'm scared," Harris, the mother of a teenage son, said.

No law enforcement officers attended the meeting. Mota said that while police officers aren't perfect, she believes they try their best. Allentown business owner John Rosario also said he doesn't believe Allentown has a police brutality problem.

No one in attendance shared information about Santos.

According to authorities, an officer was dispatched at 5:44 p.m. Saturday. On the 911 tape, a caller reported "suspicious activity" in the area of Hamilton Boulevard and Lincoln Avenue.

"Caller reported a male jumping on cars in front of Dorney Park. Hispanic male with blue shirt and shorts. Male is bleeding from his arm," a dispatcher says.

County dispatchers then begin receiving 911 calls about "shots fired," according to the recording provided by Broadcastify.

At a news conference Saturday, District Attorney Jim Martin said the Lehigh County 911 Center received multiple calls about a man "interfering with traffic," Martin said. The man also damaged vehicles, including ripping a window off a vehicle, he said.

At about 5:50 p.m., a witness said the man was hanging off a police vehicle as it drove east. When the officer pulled over, the man began banging on the windshield and the vehicle's side, the witness said. Video shot from a camera phone in the Comfort Suites parking lot shows the man walk away from the police vehicle, turn around and walk back toward the officer. The officer repeatedly orders the man to "get on the ground." The man continues to walk toward the officer. He briefly raises one open hand and lowers it. The officer fires five shots, and the man crumples forward.

The man does not appear to be armed with a weapon on the video.

A call of shots fired then went out across the radio dispatch.

The unidentified officer remains on paid leave while state police investigate the shooting, Martin has said.

The last time someone died as a result of a police shooting in Lehigh County was in March. Authorities say 26-year-old Aaron Ibrahim was fleeing a Walmart in Lower Macungie Township when he pointed a homemade gun at a trooper during a foot chase. Less than two months later, Martin ruled the shooting justified.

The scene where Santos was shot was quiet Monday. The only noises came from passing cars and the occasional delighted screams of roller coaster riders across the highway at Dorney Park. A knot of television trucks idled in a parking lot overlooking the highway.

Managers at the hotels along the busy thoroughfare declined to speak with a reporter.

Someone had tied a small bundle of flowers wrapped in purple packaging to the wooden posts in front of the Comfort Suites hotel, but left no note. By Monday evening, many of the lavender blooms in the bouquet drooped to the ground, wilted.

Reporters Pamela Lehman and Sarah Wojcik contributed to this story.

EXCERPTS FROM 911 CALL BEFORE SOUTH WHITEHALL POLICE SHOOTING

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Credit: By Laurie Mason Schroeder; Jacqueline Palochko - Of The Morning Call - Reporters Pamela Lehman and Sarah Wojcik contributed to this story.

Caption: Chronological screen shots from a video obtained by The Morning Call show the seconds leading up to the fatal shooting of a man by a South Whitehall Township police officer on Saturday. The panels show the progressional stages of the incident.

Police investigate the scene of a fatal shooting by a South Whitehall Township police officer. The officer is on paid leave pending the conclusion of the investigation.

A small bundle of flowers was tied Monday to wooden posts near the scene of a South Whitehall Township police shooting. An unidentified officer shot and killed 44-year-old Joseph Santos alongside the road after authorities say Santos was interfering with traffic.

South Whitehall Commissioner Mark Pinsley (right) speaks at a community meeting Monday night in Center City Allentown, centered around the South Whitehall shooting. The meeting was attended by about 30 people.

SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL

JANE THERESE/SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL

THE MORNING CALL

Madeleine Cook/THE MORNING CALL

DETAILS

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