

911 call: Man shot dead sought help

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FULL TEXT

"My mind is gone. Your daddy's mind is gone. I don't want you to be around me right now, son. I don't. I feel like I'm going to kill my whole family."

Jermaine Massey

On a 911 call

"If negotiation is, 'Drop it, drop it, drop it,' that's not negotiating, I'm sorry."

Traci Fant

A community activist representing the family

Jermaine Massey called for help.

He dialed 911 to ask someone to take him away from his home before he hurt his family. He explained to a dispatcher he suffers from bipolar disorder.

The dispatcher on the 911 tape told him to stay calm. She said, "We're on the way to help you."

Deputies arrived to find Massey on a back porch outside his 3rd Avenue home in Greenville County and began to negotiate as he allegedly held a knife.

Seven to 10 minutes later, he was shot and killed after deputies said he charged at them with a knife.

The critical moments before Massey's death were revealed in a 911 call obtained by The Greenville News through a Freedom of Information Act request.

The call indicated the 35-year-old was having an apparent mental health crisis and had called authorities for help before the March 19 shooting. He repeatedly told the dispatcher he was "fixing to do something stupid."

"My mind is gone. Your daddy's mind is gone," Massey said to his son while on the phone with a dispatcher. "I don't want you to be around me right now, son. I don't. I feel like I'm going to kill my whole family."

Sheriff Will Lewis said Massey charged at the deputies with a knife sometime after they had already tried to get him to put it down. His longtime girlfriend and children were brought away from the house, Lewis said, because they were considered "potential hostage victims."

Lewis said Massey appeared extremely agitated.

Deputies had no other choice in the situation but to use lethal force, Lewis said. The State Law Enforcement Division has launched an investigation, and the four deputies involved in the shooting were placed on leave.

The 911 call recording ended before the shooting happened.

Public records requests for video footage from the shooting have been denied.

Meanwhile, Massey's family members and community activists are seeking justice. They said the 13th Circuit Solicitor's Office brought them in Tuesday to show them the video footage.

They told media they believed officers used excessive force and that the reported negotiating was not adequate.

Massey's sister, Tamika Gordon, spoke about the encounter Wednesday during a press conference.

"He was pacing in circles," she said. "They just kept saying, 'Drop the knife.' Nobody ever said, 'Jermaine, what's wrong? Jermaine, do you need an ambulance? Jermaine, what is it?' Nobody ever said that. The only thing they were saying was, 'Jermaine, drop the knife. Jermaine, drop the knife. Jermaine, drop the knife.'"

"And the more they said that, it's like the more of a meltdown he was having. He had the knife —whatever he had —he had it to his chest. I can't say it was a knife because I can't tell that's what it was, but he did have it against his

chest."

Traci Fant, a community activist representing the family, said it didn't appear deputies tried to negotiate with Massey before the shooting.

"If negotiation is, 'Drop it, drop it, drop it,' that's not negotiating, I'm sorry," Fant said. "No one tried to have a conversation with Jermaine or ask what was wrong."

Gordon said she could see Massey step toward the deputies in the video and then heard five shots.

"It was just a step," Gordon said. "It wasn't no threat. It wasn't no charge."

Sheriff Lewis, on the night of the shooting, addressed the media and spoke of law enforcement training as it pertains to suspects armed with knives in close proximity. He said deputies are trained to know that suspects can quickly make it to a deputy to harm him or her when they're within 30 feet.

"They tried multiple times to get away from him as he was armed," Lewis said. "If somebody has a knife, they can close that distance very quickly."

In the 911 call, Massey said he had an argument with his longtime girlfriend, Tiffany Copeland, and didn't want to be around anyone.

"I'm asking for somebody to come help me off the premises," he told the dispatcher.

The dispatcher then asked about his mental illness diagnosis.

"Bipolar, and a little bit of schizophrenia, but I haven't been hearing any voices today," Massey said.

The dispatcher replies: "If you would, try not to do anything before we get an officer there, OK?"

Massey replies: "I will try not to, though I'm itching real bad."

Dispatcher: "Do you want to stay on the phone, would that be easier for you?"

Massey: "I feel like I'm getting ready to do something stupid."

Dispatcher: "Listen to me, just calm down and we're going to send an officer there."

Massey: "No, no, I just feel it. I feel it. I feel it in my (expletive) heart. I'm fixing to do something real stupid. And my kids are out here, and I don't want my kids to see this (expletive)."

Massey is then heard consoling his children.

"Hey son, I love you. Just so you know, I love you," he said.

Then, deputies can be heard on the 911 call, saying, "Don't do it. Don't do it. Drop the knife. Drop the knife" followed by screams.

Family members said that's when Massey was hit by Tasers.

They said the whole ordeal stemmed from an earlier run-in with law enforcement.

Massey came home from a convenience store agitated about an encounter with a deputy hours earlier. They said he was "profiled" and "harassed" by a deputy who approached him and asked him questions about why he was limping. Massey was using crutches and had been recovering from a leg injury, the family said.

The Sheriff's Office has declined to provide information on the alleged prior encounter.

Paton Blough, a Greenville mental health advocate and member of the National Alliance for Mental Illness, has been a local leader in helping law enforcement agencies and detention centers improve how they handle those suffering from mental illnesses.

Blough, who has bipolar disorder, said many officers with the Greenville Police Department have taken NAMI's Crisis Intervention Team training. He also said some deputies with the Sheriff's Office have gone through the training, but he did not know how many.

Calls to the Sheriff's Office were not returned regarding the crisis intervention training and whether any of the officers involved in the shooting had been trained.

Blough said Massey's shooting appears to mirror the very scenarios that officers examine during the training. Blough said the goal is to get law enforcement officers to take their time to learn more about a person's situation before using force.

"We're not trying to take away the right to use force," Blough said. "We're trying to give officers another option, which is ultimately their brain and their knowledge."

If de-escalation tactics weren't working, Blough said, it might have been feasible to fall back and call on a deputy who has been through mental health training.

"The knife scenario is exactly like the scenario we think of," Blough said. "Hmm, this isn't working. Let's redirect. Let's ask them some questions. What's your name? What's going on with you tonight? If that isn't working, change your tone. If the lead deputy is not making progress, maybe his backup should talk to him. We teach tactical pauses."

Activists in Greenville are calling for the Sheriff's Office to find ways to improve de-escalation procedures, as well as their encounters with people of color and people with mental illnesses.

"We have to move this community away from diversity and inclusion language and really talk about race relations," community activist Paul Guy said.

Guy said a group of community activist groups will hold a rally and march to the Solicitor's Office on April 28 to encourage ways to create better relationships with law enforcement.

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