

'We need answers'

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FULL TEXT

"Why did they have to kill him? He was a father and a husband and a provider, and now three children have to grow up without their father for a senseless crime that the police have caused."

Tiffany Copeland

Jermaine Massey's wife

The family of a man killed in a deputy-involved shooting has disputed law enforcement's version of events and threatened legal action against the Greenville County Sheriff's Office.

Jermaine Massey, 35, of Greenville, was shot and killed Monday after deputies said he charged at them with a knife. Sheriff Will Lewis said deputies had responded to his home at 234 3rd Avenue in the Poe Mill community for a reported disturbance there Monday evening.

"Why did they have to kill him? He was a father and a husband and a provider, and now three children have to grow up without their father for a senseless crime that the police have caused," Massey's wife, Tiffany Copeland, said.

Copeland stood with other family members and advocacy group leaders outside Massey's home Wednesday to demand answers to the questions they still have surrounding the killing.

Hours before the shooting, family representatives said Massey went to a convenience store where he was "profiled" and "harassed" by a Sheriff's Office deputy. Family members said they believe the deputies' response to his house was somehow related to the earlier encounter.

"Consistent with all officer involved shootings and in an effort to maintain the integrity of the investigation, the Sheriff's Office will defer comment on the incident until the conclusion of the SLED and 13th Circuit Solicitor's Office's investigation," Sheriff's Office Sgt. Ryan Flood said via email Wednesday evening in response to questions about the 911 call and the alleged earlier encounter.

Calls to the Sheriff's Office seeking information on the alleged earlier encounter were not returned Wednesday afternoon.

The Sheriff's Office has denied requests for the 911 call recordings connected to the case. Details about the type of disturbance and nature of the 911 call are unclear.

"I am unable to fulfill your request at this time due to the ongoing and active SLED and (internal affairs) investigations concerning the incident," Greta McIntyre, a legal investigator with the Sheriff's Office, said in response to The News' public records request for the 911 calls associated with the ordeal. "We as an agency can't provide this material prior to the conclusion of both our internal as well as the SLED investigations."

State law doesn't permit an agency to withhold a public document, including 911 calls, solely on the basis of an ongoing investigation.

South Carolina Press Association attorney Taylor Smith said agencies must show how the very nature of producing a record to a requesting agency would without question interfere with a law enforcement matter.

"The thing I would particularly advise them to look at is the first word of every section. Would interfere. Would disclose. They have to show that by their very disclosure, it would hurt the agency," Smith said.

Lewis had said there were at least five people inside the home when deputies arrived, describing them as "potential hostage victims," so deputies tried to get them out of the house as quickly as they could, he said.

Lewis addressed media at the scene Monday night, stating that deputies tried less-than lethal tactics to apprehend

Massey before he charged at them wielding "something similar to a butcher's knife."

Deputies fired at least one shot during the altercation, striking Massey at least once, according to the Sheriff's Office. He was treated for injuries on scene before being transported to Greenville Memorial Hospital where he died, the Coroner's Office stated.

U.A. Thompson, an advocacy group leader representing the family, said they don't believe Massey was armed. "All we know is there is no butcher knife missing from the kitchen of knives," Thompson said. "What we do know is that he had a Black & Mild in his hand. He posed no threat. He was 130 pounds at best, out in the back of the yard playing with his children."

Thompson said Massey was hit with a Taser several times before the actual shooting.

Copeland and two of Massey's children witnessed the shooting, Thompson said. Massey came home agitated over his deputy encounter at the convenience store, Thompson said.

"When you are profiled, it's aggravating, especially when you aren't breaking the law," Thompson said. "There was no need to shoot and kill him."

Body camera footage was captured from the incident, but the recording is not being released, Berry said. South Carolina law states that body camera videos are not public records available under the Freedom of Information Act.

Community activist Paul Guy said they plan to file a civil lawsuit against the Sheriff's Office after conducting their own independent investigation.

"Especially at the hands of law enforcement, it's paramount that the citizens understand what took place and how things transpired," Guy said. "We are encouraged this time that we have ability and the expertise to conduct our own investigations."

The State Law Enforcement Division is investigating the shooting. This is the Greenville County Sheriff's Office's first deputy-involved shooting this year. The agency had five last year, said SLED spokesman Thom Berry.

Statewide, there have been 10 officer-involved shootings. There were 49 last year.

The Sheriff's Office has also declined to name the four deputies involved, though they were all placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of an investigation, per department protocol.

It remains unclear how many shots were fired and how many times Massey was struck.

"I don't know how many fired, but four were present at the incident," Flood said. "That doesn't necessarily mean that all four shot."

Typically, the Sheriff's Office places deputies on leave if they are present at an officer-involved shooting but not necessarily the ones firing, Flood said.

Berry said only one in-car dashboard camera was activated during the shooting because only one vehicle responded to the scene with lights and sirens, which automatically prompts the camera to start recording. And that vehicle, he said, was parked in front of the home whereas the incident primarily took place behind the home. A wreath of white flowers was hung on the front porch of the home earlier in the day. Below it, a small strip of yellow caution tape sat from where law enforcement had carried out an investigation Monday night.

William Smith, who lives a few houses down on 3rd Avenue, said mostly older residents live there so there's not much law enforcement activity.

"I heard like four or five shots, I thought somebody was shooting fireworks it was like pop, pop, pop, pop, pop," William Smith said, who added he's lived there for 14 years. "We ain't had this kind of action in a long time."

Kenya Young, Massey's mother-in-law, said her grandchildren are struggling to cope with knowing their father is gone.

"He'll tell me, 'I'm sad. I miss my daddy. Police killed my daddy,'" Young said. "But his school is pretty good. We've got him going to some counseling."

"Why did they have to kill him? He was a father and a husband and a provider, and now three children have to grow up without their father for a senseless crime that the police have caused."

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CAPTION:

Tiffany Copeland speaks about the shooting death of her husband, Jermaine Massey, on Wednesday.

JOSH MORGAN/Staff

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