

Expert: Training might have prevented shooting

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FULL TEXT

"After watching the body camera video of the Jermaine Massey Tasing and shooting, I believe that had the deputies on scene been Crisis Intervention Team certified, his death may have been avoided."

Paton Blough

Founder of the mental health awareness organization Rehinge and a member of the NAMI South Carolina state board

A South Carolina mental health expert says he is "confident" Crisis Intervention Team training would have changed the outcome in the shooting death of Jermaine Massey.

Bill Lindsey, the executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Health, said the organization's free CIT training teaches law enforcement officers specifically on how to handle those in crisis experiencing mental health episodes.

Massey, 35, was shot and killed outside his Poe Mill community home March 19 after deputies said he charged at them with a knife.

He called 911 to seek help during a mental breakdown, telling a dispatcher he had a bipolar disorder. None of the four deputies involved had been through the 40-hour CIT training course.

Solicitor Walt Wilkins released bodycam footage from the shooting and announced Thursday he found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing on behalf of the deputies involved.

Lindsey viewed the footage Friday and called the shooting "incredibly disturbing." He said he believes the shooting would have been prevented had the deputies been trained in CIT.

"You never know what's going to happen, but I'm confident we would have had a different outcome if a trained officer who knows how to de-escalate a problem had been there. That's the reason we do the training," Lindsey said. "It's incredibly disturbing on our end that something like this happens, especially when there is an opportunity to get trained and be able to de-escalate somebody in crisis."

Lindsey said officers who have had such training understand tactics to re-direct the focus of someone in a crisis and get them to think about things other than the situation at hand to calm them down and get them detained.

"In most situations, you're trying to come up with something that the person can relate to other than the situation they're in right now," he said.

While saying "drop the knife" indicated what the deputies wanted Massey to do, the tactic wasn't the appropriate means to get him to comply, Lindsey said.

Lindsey added that NAMI has had "tremendous success" with the Greenville Police Department and getting police officers trained to reduce overall crisis-related incidents.

About a month before Greenville County deputies shot and killed Jermaine Massey, his older brother had a similar run-in with law enforcement but a very different outcome.

Tamika Gordon, Massey's sister, said her older brother was having a mental breakdown in his Greenville home earlier this year. He was breaking out windows and swinging a wooden beam. Greenville police officers responded, took him into custody and admitted him into a mental health facility.

Gordon said the officers showed concern for his safety, asking him how they could help him and what he needed. After distracting him, they were able to restrain him.

"They came with a sense of really wanting to help," Gordon said.

She spoke out Friday, a day after the announcement that the four deputies involved in the Massey shooting were cleared. In the video, deputies are seen gathering around Massey while he was in his back yard with a knife. At one point, he holds it to his chest.

The confrontation went on for about six minutes. Deputies tried to use Tasers on him, and they didn't work. The deputies repeatedly told him to "drop the knife" until Massey took steps toward one of them with a knife raised, video shows.

He was shot and killed. Eleven shots were fired, according to the report from the State Law Enforcement Division. Family members said Friday the announcement "reopened wounds" and further stressed the need for deputies to receive proper Crisis Intervention Team training led by NAMI.

"What are we supposed to say to this hurting family? Their wounds were reopened," U.A. Thompson, a family representative, said Friday during a news conference outside the Greenville County courthouse. "He will not be the last case. We must enforce this demand that CIT training be mandated on a state level."

Gordon said her other brother's encounter with law enforcement was when he was exhibiting erratic behavior inside his home. He even slapped a police officer at one point during the ordeal, she said.

He has since been committed to a mental health facility and diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she said. Gordon declined to provide her brother's name.

She said the differences in how the encounters ended up further point to the disparity in how law enforcement officers are trained.

"A lot of time, pointing out your gun and shooting doesn't help," she said.

Sheriff Johnny Mack Brown said Thursday the Sheriff's Office is in the process of getting more deputies through CIT training. One class is scheduled for July, another is set for December. Brown said Thursday he recognized the importance of such training given the prevalence of mental health issues across the country.

NAMI members have been working with the Sheriff's Office to find opportunities for more deputies to be trained, Lindsey said. Classes are scheduled across the state throughout the year, and Lindsey said he hopes deputies can find available class slots in other jurisdictions.

Records obtained by The Greenville News in May through the Freedom of Information Act showed that 106 Greenville County Sheriff's Office employees had completed the CIT training. The agency has about 450 sworn deputies.

The four deputies involved in the March 19 shooting had not taken the CIT training, though they were up-to-date with training through the state Criminal Justice Academy, which includes a two-hour mental illness class, according to Maj. Florence McCants, a spokeswoman for the academy.

NAMI's CIT training for law enforcement is a 40-hour class taken in the span of a week, Lindsey said.

The Greenville Police Department has 154 officers trained in CIT out of nearly 200.

A SLED report released by Wilkins shows Massey did not have a documented mental illness in his medical records, though family members said several of Massey's relatives have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Paton Blough, founder of the mental health awareness organization Rehinge and a member of the NAMI South Carolina state board, said he is encouraged that the Sheriff's Office has scheduled two upcoming CIT training sessions. He said the agency is "headed in the right direction."

"After watching the body camera video of the Jermaine Massey Tasing and shooting, I believe that had the deputies on scene been Crisis Intervention Team certified, his death may have been avoided," Blough said in an email. "I support these deputies and believe they only had intentions to help Mr. Massey. My heart, love and prayers go out to the Massey family and to the officers involved in this tragedy."

Traci Fant, an activist and another representative for the family, said many people today have mental illnesses that go without diagnosis. She said deputies should have been trained to recognize that he was having a mental breakdown and treated the situation as such.

"They were not looking at him like a human being; they treated him like an animal," Fant said.

Tiffany Copeland, Massey's longtime girlfriend, said she's struggling with grief, particularly with how to care for her children in the wake of such a loss. She said her son continues to ask her, "Why did the police have to shoot Daddy?"

"What are you supposed to tell a 5-year-old?" Copeland said.

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CAPTION:

Tiffany Copeland, who is the mother of Jermaine Massey's children, wipes away tears during a press conference outside the Greenville County courthouse Friday to respond to the news that the solicitor has cleared the deputies involved from any wrongdoing in the shooting death of Massey.

BART BOATWRIGHT/Staff

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