

'I'm scared': With South Whitehall death, Allentown parents worry their children will get shot by police

Palochko, Jacqueline . TCA Regional News ; Chicago [Chicago]31 July 2018.

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FULL TEXT

July 31--"I'm scared."

That was the sentiment of Phoebe Harris, an Allentown School Board member and mother of a teenage son. Harris was speaking at a community meeting Monday night in Center City Allentown, where about 30 people gathered to discuss Saturday night's fatal shooting of a 44-year-old New Jersey man by a South Whitehall police officer on Hamilton Boulevard.

The meeting was organized by Jessica Ortiz, an Allentown resident

PHOTO GALLERY: A South Whitehall Township police officer, dispatched to a report of a person interfering with traffic, shot and killed a man on Hamilton Boulevard late Saturday afternoon, July 28, 2018, according to Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin.

"No crime is worthy of being shot five times in front of Ice Cream World and Dorney Park," Ortiz said.

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

At the meeting, 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. At one point during the meeting, a 24-year-old woman broke down and said she is angry that minorities are being killed. Ortiz comforted her while Phoebe Harris handed her tissues.

Ortiz said she would like to see more officers homegrown and more speaking Spanish since there is a large Hispanic population.

Many at the meeting said they would like to see police officers receive more de-escalation and mental health training.

Lehigh County 911 dispatches on the shooting of Joseph Santos of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., reveal the first officer on the scene called for backup for a possible "mental issue."

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.

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.

An autopsy will be conducted Tuesday to determine the official cause and manner of Santos' death

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.

Laurie Mason Schroeder contributed to this report.

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