

Deputies in fatal shooting lacked 'best' mental health training

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FULL TEXT

"We have got to get this CIT (Crisis Intervention Team) training. When we have situations like this, people need to be trained to diffuse the situation, not escalate it. We don't get good outcomes with that."

Ennis Fant

Greenville County Councilman

None of the deputies involved in the shooting death of a Greenville man who called 911 for help during a mental health crisis had taken what's considered to be the most thorough training for dealing with people with mental health issues.

Records obtained by The Greenville News this week through the Freedom of Information Act list 106 Greenville County Sheriff's Office employees who have completed the Crisis Intervention Team training. The agency has about 450 sworn deputies.

The four deputies involved in the March 19 shooting were not on the list, and three of them had been with the Sheriff's Office for less than a year and a half.

Interim Sheriff Johnny Mack Brown released the names of the four deputies involved in the shooting of 35-year-old Jermaine Massey in "an effort to maintain transparency," the Sheriff's Office said in a statement Thursday.

Those involved were Master Deputy Wes Kilgore, Deputy Chris Bell, Deputy Mark Dulude and Deputy Jake Lancaster.

Lancaster was on scene but did not discharge a firearm, the Sheriff's Office said.

The Crisis Intervention Team training is an extensive, weeklong course that teaches about the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses, who to recognize in crisis situations, safe de-escalation strategies and use of community resources. CIT training is spearheaded by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, which offers the 40-hour class to law enforcement officers for free.

Kilgore, Bell, Dulude and Lancaster had taken a two-hour mandatory mental health course through the S.C. Criminal Justice Academy, according to records obtained by The News after the officers' names were made public. Ken Dority, the executive director of Greenville's chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said the Criminal Justice Academy course is "not as robust" as the 40-hour NAMI training, which he said is the best training available to officers.

Two Greenville County Council members have urged the Sheriff's Office to put all of its deputies through CIT training, a demand they voiced in the wake of Massey's death outside his 3rd Avenue home.

Greenville County Councilman Ennis Fant figured the deputies involved in the shooting had not taken NAMI's training.

"Are you surprised?" he said Friday. "We have got to get this CIT training. When we have situations like this, people need to be trained to diffuse the situation, not escalate it. We don't get good outcomes with that."

The Jermaine Massey shooting

Massey had called 911 on March 19 to report he was having a mental health crisis and was asking for someone to come help him, according to a 911 call The News obtained in March through a Freedom of Information Act request. He told a dispatcher he suffered from bipolar disorder and was "fixing to do something stupid."

Deputies responded and found Massey in the backyard of his Poe Mill community home. He was holding what appeared to be a butcher's knife, now-suspended Sheriff Will Lewis said on the night of the shooting. Lewis previously 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. After about seven to 10 minutes of negotiating and using less-than-lethal tactics to apprehend Massey, Lewis said Massey charged at the deputies with the knife, and they shot and killed him. Family members and community activists have said the shooting was unjustified and was the result of authorities' inability to properly handle someone who was having a mental breakdown. Deputies could be heard on the 911 call saying "don't do it" and "drop the knife" during interactions with him. Family members have said repeatedly shouting "drop it" does not constitute adequately trying to de-escalate the situation. The four deputies involved were placed on administrative leave following the shooting. They were cleared of wrongdoing and placed back on duty after an internal investigation through the Sheriff's Office's Office of Professional Responsibility.

The State Law Enforcement Division is still investigating the shooting, spokesman Thom Berry said Friday. Levels of training

At the Criminal Justice Academy, officers are required to complete 40 hours of in-service training every three years. One course is a two-hour "Mental Illness: An Officer's Response" class, which was made a requirement in 2017, said Maj. Florence McCants, a spokeswoman for the academy.

Previously, only a "legals" class, which educates officers on criminal law, and a criminal domestic violence class were required. The rest of the 40 hours could be made up with classes of the officer's or agency's choosing, she said.

McCants said several mental health scenarios also are integrated into other training the academy offers. She said finding additional training opportunities beyond academy requirements is encouraged.

"Whatever is going on in an agency, they can decide what classes they want to take," she said.

Fant said the academy's in-service training on mental illness alone is "not sufficient."

Dority said NAMI's 40-hour training program has reduced cases of violence in some jurisdictions.

"I am convinced it is the best thing we have to offer at this time," Dority said. "With the 40-hour version, there are a lot of stakeholders from the community involved with training and resources."

Dority said rather than an agency putting every sworn deputy through their training, which may require increasing overtime pay and adjusting schedules so that shifts are covered while deputies are in class, it's more important to have a select number of CIT-trained deputies in every section of a jurisdiction.

"What we've been trying to work with the Sheriff's Office on for the past two or three years is getting coverage on all shifts in a proximity so that we don't have to wait an hour to get a CIT-trained officer to a scenario," Dority said. Dority said law enforcement agencies with CIT-trained officers have gained better perception and trust from the community and sent fewer people to jail by diverting them to other emergency resources.

"There are many benefits, but two of the key benefits are fewer injuries to folks with mental health conditions and fewer injuries to officers," Dority said. "That's why it's critical."

Sgt. Ryan Flood, a spokesman for the Sheriff's Office, has previously said the agency will host its first Crisis Intervention Team school in July and is "fully committed to training our deputies to properly interact and respond to those dealing with mental illnesses."

History of the deputies

Each of the four deputies involved in Massey's shooting completed the S.C. Criminal Justice Academy's course on mental health in January.

Kilgore has been in law enforcement since 2003 when he worked for the Cobb County Police Department in Georgia and later the McIntosh County Sheriff's Office in Georgia. He came to the Greenville County Sheriff's Office in 2012, according to his employment records obtained from the Criminal Justice Academy.

Bell has been with the Sheriff's Office since May 2017, according to his records from the academy. Records show that Dulude has been with the Sheriff's Office since Jan. 2. His career in South Carolina began in 2011 when he began working for the S.C. Highway Patrol. He left the Highway Patrol on Dec. 25, 2017. Lancaster started with the Sheriff's Office on Nov. 21, 2016, his record shows. The Sheriff's Office had previously denied multiple requests from The News to release the names of the four officers. Community activists representing Massey's family had urged law enforcement to publicize the deputies' names to learn more about their backgrounds and help the family's grieving process. "All he wanted was help," Massey's sister, Tamika Gordon, said in the wake of the shooting, "and they didn't give it to him."

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CAPTION:

The family of Jermaine Massey holds a news conference outside of the Law Enforcement Center after his death was ruled a homicide on April 13. Greenville County Sheriff's deputies fatally shot Massey after responding to a 911 call he made about his mental health crisis.

LAUREN PETRACCA/greenville news

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