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Fatal police shooting brings new focus to training

Author: Corey G. Johnson The Daily Reflector

Article Text:

Additional training procedures are being developed in Pitt County that will help prevent tragedies like Thursday's shooting death of a Greenville man with bipolar disorder, a local mental health official said Friday.

Debra Dihoff, director of Pitt County Mental Health, said mental health professionals, local law enforcement and governmental officials hope to implement the new training methods, which were created in Tennessee and are utilized across the country, by July 1.

While she couldn't comment specifically on the actions police took with Kerry Edward Turner, 34, of 1201 Crestwood Drive, Dihoff said she had nothing but sympathy for everyone involved. "You must remember, none of the people out there went out there with that outcome in mind," Dihoff said. "My heart goes out to the family (of Turner) and those officers. This is indeed a tragedy for our community."

Turner, who according to court records suffered from bipolar disorder, led Greenville police officers on a car chase that ended with a collision, gun shots and his death at 14th Street and Greenville Boulevard. The officers were trying to take him to a mental health facility to be committed for treatment. Earlier Thursday morning, Turner had voluntarily turned himself to Pitt County Memorial Hospital for treatment after a dispute with his girlfriend. He left a short time later, prompting family members to go before a magistrate for permission to commit him. Three officers involved in the shooting, K.L. Knox, C.E. Adkins and Sgt. D.C. Johnson, have been placed on administrative leave with pay. Johnson, a 27-year employee of the police department and member of A platoon, was the on-duty shift supervisor at time. Knox is a six-year veteran and Adkins has been with the department since August 2003 after serving a stint in the Pitt County Sheriff's Office.

When officers arrived at the house about 6 a.m., Turner ran into the house and barricaded himself. Minutes later, officers received information that Turner might possess either a shotgun or a rifle, a police document said.

According to an incident report, Turner pointed a weapon at an officer.

Greenville Police Maj. Kevin Smeltzer refused Friday to confirm whether Turner had a weapon. Smeltzer also declined to answer questions about whether a weapon was recovered or the number of shots fired by officers, saying it would interfere with an investigation being conducted by the State Bureau of Investigation.

The SBI is trying to determine if the use of force was proper and within legal guidelines.

Greenville Police Department policies on the use of force and dealing with a person with mental illness stipulate that while the least amount of force possible should be used, deadly force can be employed if that officer believes the action is in defense of human life, including his own, or in defense of any person from imminent danger of serious bodily injury.

The guidelines define imminent danger to be part of a subjective evaluation of whether a

suspect's actions, if allowed to continue unchecked, are likely to result in death or serious bodily injury to a police officer or third person.

Gary Van Reede, a senior psychologist with Pitt County Mental Health, said people with bipolar disorder usually have moods swings of extreme happiness or sadness but very rarely become violent.

He said medications can stabilize the moods, but early intervention and strong support from others are critical.

Dihoff said law enforcement officials have expressed eagerness to get the new training.

"We want our law enforcement to feel more empowered with more tools and more options,"

Dihoff said. "People who are in crisis can be de-escalated."

Corey G. Johnson can be contacted at cjohnson@coxnc.com or 329-9565.

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