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Man, 81, kills himself in front of officers

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Article Text:

An 81-year-old Denville man asked his wife if she wanted to die with him, then walked into his backyard yesterday and fatally shot himself in front of eight Denville police officers with guns drawn, demanding he drop his weapon.

Clifford Knauss, a retired gas station owner and mechanic, pointed the World War II-era 9 mm semi-automatic pistol at his chest and pulled the trigger at about 9:48 a.m.

Police rushed to the Knauss address on Florence Avenue in the Rock Ridge Lake section after a grandson, who was not at the house, called police. While officers were en route, police called the Knauss home and listened to Knauss' wife of 49 years, Helen, plead for help into the phone, said Lt. Christopher Wagner.

Knauss had just "told his wife, 'I'm going to kill myself. Do you want to come with me?' She told him no. Then he walked outside into the backyard just as police arrived," Wagner said.

He was pronounced dead at Saint Clare's Hospital in Denville at 10:36 a.m., police said. His wife did not know he kept a weapon in the house. Police searched, but said they did not find a note that explained why Knauss killed himself.

He did, however, hint about his intentions Sunday night, at dinner. He asked his wife, grandson and others if they knew what to do after he died. "He said, 'If something were to happen to me, do you know where the lockbox key is?'" Wagner said.

Yesterday morning, her husband complained about health insurance issues, saying he was afraid "he was going to get caught. He said, 'I think I'm going to get arrested because he had been applying to multiple health insurance companies to get medication for his hypertension,'" Wagner said.

The officers who witnessed the shooting were offered counseling, but declined, he said.

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Caption:

1. Emergency personnel from Denville and Morris County investigate the backyard where a man shot and killed himself yesterday morning.

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