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N.J. releases body cam footage of man who died in Trenton police custody

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New Jersey officials released footage Thursday showing how officers chased, restrained, hit and later tried to save the life of a 29-year-old man earlier this year.

Stephen A. Dolceamore, 29, of Media, Pa., died in Trenton police custody April 3.

The state attorney general's office is required to investigate the death, and the incident will eventually be reviewed by a grand jury to determine if any officers should be charged with a crime, although a press release noted the coronavirus pandemic has temporarily halted jury work.

While the case remains under investigation, the office posted three body cam videos online since the "initial phase of the investigation is substantially complete."

Investigators showed Dolceamore's family the video Thursday, according to the news release. Two videos last more than six minutes, while one lasts almost 12.

The "tragic incident illustrates why the Trenton Police Department must continue to expand its efforts to be more accountable," Trenton Police Department Director Sheilah Coley said in a statement Friday.

Coley did not specifically condemn or condone the officers' actions, but she said the department needed to review more complaints from residents. She noted Trenton police were handing out more body cameras while also starting to teach cops "techniques for restraining suspects that don't require the use of physical force."

Trenton officers had to wrestle with "a simultaneous uptick in crime and a greater demand for accountability," she said. "I'm confident that my officers can – and will – meet that challenge."

About a quarter to noon on April 3, Trenton cops arrived at St. Francis Medical Center because a man was "behaving erratically" and "walking into traffic," officials said.

When one video shows an officer driving up, another cop already appears to be chasing Dolceamore through the hospital parking lot. Dolceamore is shirtless and in grey jeans.

The first officer gets out of his vehicle and runs into the lot. Dolceamore can be seen on his knees on the asphalt, flanked by two cops.

"I can't breathe," Dolceamore appears to shout twice, while also yelling, "help." It is not clear how, or if officers are touching him at that point.

“Spray him,” one cop says.

“Get on the ground now, get your hands behind your back,” another shouts.

The three push Dolceamore face down into wood chips in the middle of the lot. Dolceamore continues shouting “help” while officers tell him to give up his hands.

“Trying to crush my skull,” Dolceamore shouts as one officer pushes down on Dolceamore’s head. They struggle for several moments. One punches Dolceamore at least five times in the side while Dolceamore pulls his left arm away.

Cops eventually handcuff Dolceamore’s arms behind his back, about two minutes after he’s first pushed to the ground. Dolceamore appears to continue pushing his body up while one officer presses his knee on Dolceamore’s back.

A cop calls for assistance. When a fourth officer arrives, the first three are still holding Dolceamore down.

Another cop pushes his knee onto Dolceamore, while other officers hold his legs. Dolceamore continues to yell for help, and he tries to move his body to the side.

“Can’t breath,” Dolceamore shouts. “I’m gonna die.”

Dolceamore’s movement slows. During approximately 2 minutes and 15 seconds after the handcuffs click shut, Dolceamore’s cries become murmurs, until he eventually stops talking.

Cops remain on top for about another minute. One asks a motionless Dolceamore if he’s ok, and an officer lifts a gloved hand off Dolceamore’s head and slaps him twice lightly on the face.

“Got a pulse?” somebody asks. An officer stands. Someone else asks if Dolceamore is ok.

Dolceamore’s head appears to be limp, according to one video.

“Yeah, he has a pulse,” somebody says, and one of Dolceamore’s fingers appears to curl, according to another video.

“Anybody got Narcan?” an officer says, a reference to a drug that can reverse overdoses.

A cop lays his fingers against Dolceamore’s wrist.

“It’s weak,” the officer says about Dolceamore’s pulse. “It’s super weak. We need to get him to the hospital.”

He runs to a police SUV. “We need to get him to the hospital now,” the cop shouts. He unlocks the trunk and pulls out a small box.

Back in the parking lot, officers pull off Dolceamore while one remains kneeling to the side.

“Turn him around,” someone says. “He’s turning purple.”

Someone shakes Dolceamore. “C’mon man, wake up.”

Officers turn Dolceamore on his back about 70 seconds after somebody can first be heard asking about a pulse.

The officer with Narcan runs back to the scene and unwraps the drug.

“Possible overdose, you gotta step it up,” somebody says, apparently in reference to others on their way.

The cop with Narcan appears to administer the drug about 45 seconds after Dolceamore was turned over, although Dolceamore’s face is purposely blurred. Police begin chest compressions about 30 seconds later, while other officers watch and again ask if Dolceamore has a pulse.

A cop checks that Dolceamore’s mouth is clear, but Dolceamore doesn’t respond.

Sirens can be heard in the distance, and a man in scrubs runs to the scene and begins pushing on Dolceamore’s chest shortly before the videos stop.

From the moment Dolceamore is pushed down to when other first responders arrive lasts less than 9 minutes.

Dolceamore was pronounced dead at the hospital at 12:40 p.m., about an hour after police showed up, officials said.