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Police killed an N.J. man in his apartment. Could new policing reforms have prevented it?

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In an Asbury Park apartment last month, just eight minutes after police responded to a 911 call about a fight, Hasani Best asked officers to find another person to speak with him. The 39-year-old was upset, armed with a knife and had dealt with the cops before.

“Get somebody else,” Best said to the officers, according to police body camera footage released by the state attorney general’s office last week.

“We’ll make a call, get somebody else out here,” an officer said to Asbury Park police Sgt. Sean DeShader, who had his gun drawn outside Best’s room.

No backup ever came to negotiate with Best, according to the video.

Instead, 45 minutes after the negotiation began and a Taser failed, DeShader fired his weapon at least twice, killing the father of three.

The New Jersey Attorney General’s office released this video Sept. 22, 2020, of an Asbury Park police officer fatally shooting a man in August 2020. This is a 7-minute clip of the 45 minutes of footage and all censorship was done by officials before releasing the footage.

In the midst of nationwide protests and calls for policing reform, Best’s death raises questions about police officers’ training to deal with people in mental distress and whether social workers or crisis responders should also be dispatched to certain calls.

“By no means do I think police officers should be social workers, nor should social workers be police officers,” said Juan Rios, a practicing social worker and professor at Seton Hall who has helped Newark expand their community intervention efforts.

“However, if we could put a little social work into policing, it would make a big difference.”

“You don’t need seven police officers and zero social workers,” Rios added. “What would it look like if we had two social workers or crisis responders, and a police officer waiting out of the view of the individual? How would that shift it psychologically for him?”

The state attorney general’s office is still investigating the shooting, and a grand jury has not yet weighed in. An Asbury Park police spokesman declined to comment on the incident. DeShader could not be reached for comment.

Best's family and community leaders have called Best's killing unjustified and demanded the firing of DeShader, who is on administrative leave, according to a police spokesman.

"He didn't deserve this," Carol Sanders, who raised Best and considers herself his mother, said at a press conference last week. "They didn't have to take his life. They were laughing and joking with him. Then they shot him."

This encounter had a drastically different result than another standoff in New Jersey last week, in which authorities said a man fired a nail gun at police, set a fire and threw bricks and knives during a standoff that lasted nearly four hours and injured two officers.

That man was later arrested and transferred to a medical facility for evaluation and treatment.

Some advocates want residents in crisis to have other options than talking to an armed officer, especially since many 911 calls do not involve violent crime. Fewer than 13% of crimes New Jersey police responded to were violent during a recent year, and that doesn't even factor in calls not involving crime, according to the State Police's 2017 crime report.

A few cities across the country are experimenting with programs that dispatch non-police personnel to certain non-violent incidents, like homelessness, people in mental distress or certain disputes.

Cops in Olympia, Washington partner with a "crisis response team" to defuse arguments and help people struggling with mental health and substance abuse. Eugene, Oregon has had a team since 1989, and they handle a fifth of all 911 calls, saving the city more than \$2 million every year, according to its clinic.

Denver announced a similar pilot program earlier in the summer, and had handled 360 calls by the beginning of this month, according to Chris Richardson, an associate director at Denver's Mental Health Center. About a third of those calls came from police officers who decided civilians were better equipped to address a situation, Richardson said.

But Richardson said a similar team would not have been able to help in Asbury Park, where police arrived after one of Best's neighbors called 911 about a physical fight between Best and his partner.

He said civilians are not necessarily ideal to handle domestic violence.

"I can verbal jiu jitsu and de-escalate someone, but if they are going hands-on with each other, I don't feel comfortable that I'm trained enough," he said. "I think that's truly where the officers are able to manage that situation."

He also said hiring the right people for a crisis team can be like finding a “leprechaun riding a unicorn.” It takes a special person who can effectively talk with cops, the homeless and emotionally disturbed people every day.

In New Jersey, state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal recently announced an initiative to expand “crisis intervention” training to “help officers respond to situations involving individuals with mental health issues.” Asbury Park was one of the places chosen for a pilot program.

The plan, which is being implemented with the New Jersey Crisis Intervention Team Center of Excellence, a mental health organization that collaborates with law enforcement agencies, relies on community partnerships between law enforcement and mental health and addiction professionals, officials said.

The program is still being developed in Asbury Park, according to a Grewal spokesman. The spokesman declined to answer specific questions about how the program could have played a role in this incident.

Officers in New Jersey currently go through limited training on how to deal with individuals in mental distress, but experts say it should be more expansive.

“The culture surrounding public safety at this point doesn’t necessarily emphasize that these interventions need to be handled by folks who are specialized in this work,” Rios said.

‘Talk to that individual like a human being’

Officers pleaded with Best for 45 minutes to drop the knife and come out of the room, according to the video.

“Come on, Mr. Best,” DeShader said. “We’ve dealt with you too many times. Just put the knife down.”

Best told the officers he was “tired” and that they would be justified in using deadly force because he had a weapon and the Taser was unsuccessful, according to the video.

Thomas Shea, a former Long Branch police officer and the director of the Graduate Police Studies Program at Seton Hall University, said the footage he reviewed brought flashbacks to a standoff he had with a man armed with a large knife a decade ago.

“A part of policing that isn’t communicated well enough to the public is what it actually feels like to be on the other side of that,” Shea said. “It’s terrifying.”

Shea remembered being on “high alert physiologically and mentally.” If the man had made a sudden movement or threatened him, he “may have shot him even though it was the last thing in the world I ever would have wanted to do,” he said.

Best made a sudden movement and then threatened to stab DeShader, though the video does not show Best advancing at DeShader in the moment before the shots were fired.

“I believe (the cop) was so afraid at that point it was coming to that situation where he was going to have to shoot him because of that initial advancement and then the threat,” Shea said.

Richard Rivera, an expert in police misconduct who reviewed the footage multiple times, said he was struck by how “no one is trying to relate to the guy and hear him out”

“Wait outside and have someone trained in negotiating talk to the guy,” Rivera said of an alternative way to handle the situation. “Wait it out and he will eventually fall asleep.”

Shea said he understands the call for crisis responders to be used in this situation, but said, “That’s all going to change the first time a social worker is murdered as a result.”

Dennis Kenney, a former police officer and criminal justice professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York who reviewed the footage, said police departments collaborating with clinical workers is “a pretty straight forward, common sense approach.”

“The police themselves would tell you they are not particularly well-suited to handle people in mental crisis,” Kenney said. “They are not trained for it. The tools that they have available to them are pretty limited so there’s not too much that they can do. This would have been a case that would have been good for that, especially because there is a known history with the guy.”

Moments before Best was shot, the situation seemed to be defusing as the officers and Best were joking about cutting DeShader’s hair.

“Right in that moment where they started laughing, that is when you continue to keep him laughing,” Rios said. “You stay riding on that and don’t make your next move with a gun in his face. You put down your weapon and start to talk to that individual like a human being and you back up.”

Staff writers Steve Strunsky and Anthony Attrino contributed to this report.