

Police kill man at Portland homeless shelter for allegedly refusing to drop knife

By Alec Andersen
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Police shot 48-year-old John Elifritz to death at a homeless shelter Saturday night in Portland, Oregon after responding to reports of a man brandishing a knife at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in the building.

Saturday evening, police received reports of a car crash blocking the tracks of a Tri-Met light rail train and subsequently learned that the car had been involved in a carjacking earlier in the day. On the way to the scene, they received reports of someone entering an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at the nearby Cityteam Ministries homeless shelter and cutting himself with a knife.

An emergency dispatcher told officers responding to the incident that police had received multiple calls earlier in the day that a man, subsequently identified as Elifritz, was holding a knife to his throat and ranting about his wife and daughter being murdered, but officers had disengaged with him during that encounter.

When police arrived at the shelter, they initially fired less lethal “beanbag” rounds at Elifritz before switching to live ammunition. According to the official police account the failed to comply with orders to drop a knife and lunged at police, prompting officers to shoot him several times.

However, a video of the incident shared on social media exposes the police narrative as a lie. In the video, Elifritz can be seen standing in a corner of a large room enclosed by a short wall. Police fired three shots, presumably the beanbag rounds, at him through the door before identifying themselves or providing any instruction.

When roughly a dozen heavily armed police enter the room, there is nobody else in the vicinity of Elifritz, who appears disoriented. Police can be heard yelling, “Drop the knife!” and Elifritz bends over as if to

comply before standing back up. He then tries to say something to the officers, though his words are not discernible over the officers shouting and the barking of a police dog.

Without warning, police fire a volley of gunshots at Elifritz, who stumbles forward before collapsing to the floor. It is unclear from the video whether Elifritz was holding a knife at the time of the shooting. However, at no point in the video does he appear to “lunge” at the officers and given the distance and physical barriers between them, Elifritz could not have posed a threat even if he had done so. It is apparent from the video and witness accounts that police made no attempt to deescalate the confrontation before gunning him down.

According to the video, less than 30 seconds elapsed between the time police entered the room and when they shot Elifritz using live ammunition. At least 11 gunshots can be heard clearly during the fatal encounter toward the end of the video.

Family and friends present at a vigil at the shelter on Sunday told local news station Fox 12 that Elifritz was a loving husband and would be sorely missed by his family. They said he worked in construction and had struggled with mental health issues over the course of his life but had made great strides in recent years, including graduating from a substance abuse recovery program.

Victoria Nevarez, a close friend of the victim, told Fox 12, “I just know that what we saw and what we know, is that it was not okay and he was murdered. That’s how all of us feel.”

Nevarez went on to say: “He was an upstanding person who’d give you the last \$5 in his pocket and the shirt on his back if he needed it.”

A statement released by American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon Executive Director David Rogers

read in part, “In less than a minute, officers shoot and kill the man, while members of an already traumatized population, Portland’s homeless community, watch in horror. Was there any attempt to de-escalate the situation before officers open fire inside the homeless shelter full of innocent bystanders? If not, why not?”

Meanwhile, the Portland Police Bureau has attempted to justify the shocking murder by releasing various conflicting reports about Elifritz’s actions earlier in the day.

According to a police report, Elifritz had threatened to kill himself when confronted by police earlier in the day and police allowed him to leave in the hope that the situation would not escalate further. Later, he reportedly stole a car by force and engaged in a “road rage” incident, tailgating and pointing an object believed to be a gun at another driver. Another report said that Elifritz jumped out of a moving vehicle, appearing “drunk or high.” Yet another report alleged that Elifritz had held a knife to another man’s throat.

The police killing of Elifritz, who leaves behind a wife and 12-year-old daughter, is yet another demonstration of the fact that police violence in the United States is fundamentally an issue of class, not race. Like the largest number of victims of police homicide, Elifritz was a white man from a working-class background. He is the third person in 16 months to be fatally shot by police in Portland, a city whose chief of police, Danielle Outlaw, is an African-American woman.

Outlaw, who was appointed last year by the city’s notoriously anti-homeless Democratic mayor, Ted Wheeler, has made vague and empty pledges of transparency in the investigation into Elifritz’s killing. However, while the Portland Police Bureau had initially promised to release the names of the eight officers involved in the shooting on Sunday, it has since delayed the release indefinitely citing supposed threats to the officers’ safety.

Security camera footage of the incident has likewise been withheld pending the verdict of a grand jury investigation into whether the shooting was justified. The overwhelming majority of grand juries convened over police killings fail to bring charges against the officers involved, so it is highly unlikely that Elifritz’s killers in the police force will ever be brought to trial.

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