

Residents of Sheboygan, Wisconsin protest police murder of man with mental illness history

By Jacob Crosse
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Over 100 protesters marched Thursday night in downtown Sheboygan, Wisconsin demanding to know why police killed an African American man suffering a mental health crisis earlier in the day.

Kevan Ruffin, 32, was shot and killed by a still unidentified Sheboygan police officer Thursday morning after allegedly refusing officers' commands to "disarm" a pair of knives while reportedly charging at the officer.

The protest march was quickly organized by family, friends and community members as news of the latest victim of police violence spread throughout the community of 50,000 people in northeastern Wisconsin.

In the early evening Ruffin's family, joined by young protesters, white and black, marched to the police station chanting, "mental health matters," "no justice, no peace," and "hands up, don't shoot," "George Floyd" and "Kevan Ruffin" as they made their way through the streets of the small Midwestern city.

According to Sheboygan Police Chief Chris Domagalski, dispatch received a call at approximately 5:50 a.m. describing a man with two, three-pronged "sai" knives, chasing a woman in the street. Domagalski states that when the unnamed responding officer made contact with the man, later identified by the family as Ruffin, the officer "attempted to engage the subject in conversation from across the street, at which time the subject charged at the officer while armed with two dangerous weapons."

Domagalski alleges that the unnamed officer, who has been placed on administrative leave pending the results of a Wisconsin Department of Justice Division of Criminal Investigation inquiry, "attempted to

disengage while retreating backwards and displayed his Taser." It does not appear that the officer fired his Taser. Instead the cop, who state officials say has been with the department for two and a half years, switched to his 9 millimeter pistol and fired multiple rounds into Ruffin.

Speaking to CBS2, Kelly Ripple, a neighbor, says she thought it was "bottle rockets or something" after she heard "about eight pops go off" around 6:00 Thursday morning. Police have stated that they do have body cameras but have not released any footage at this time "due to the pending investigation."

The woman who was alleged to have been running from Ruffin was treated at a local hospital and released the same day.

Speaking to local media, Ruffin's family described him as a "teddy bear" who had been a cheerleader in high school and was passionate about learning new languages. The family stated that Ruffin had a history of mental health illness and was known to local police after being arrested and cycled through various prison and mental health facilities over the last decade.

Court records show that Ruffin had been arrested multiple times between 2009 and 2019 and charged with obstructing officers and disorderly conduct. The charges were later dismissed, dropped or Ruffin was found not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect.

Sheriyah Appleton, who found out about her cousin's death via a video on Facebook, spoke to CBS2 regarding Ruffin's mental health and the officer's deadly response, "He wasn't in his right state of mind. This is what hurts us.

"He's on medication. He has mental issues, and they knew about it," said Appleton. "So they know about it.

They've been dealing with him for over a decade.

"They shot him multiple times in his chest. There is no way somebody should be murdered like that," she said.

Ruffin's uncle, Aaron Clayborn, speaking to ABC12, concurred that the police were well aware of his nephew's mental health issues.

"He's known in this community for several years as having a mental disorder. He's been in and out of the system. He's been to mental health facilities in the state. The officers are familiar with him. Deadly force is not an option for an individual who has mental health disorders," Clayborn said.

Sheboygan police would not confirm if they knew Ruffin or were familiar with his mental health history.

The American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) Wisconsin chapter released a statement on Ruffin's slaying in which they made note of a "national pattern of police using excessive and often fatal force against people ... during routine encounters, as well as against people with mental health conditions..."

The ACLU Wisconsin called for a "transparent investigation" which would "show that questions are being heard" and "to ensure the whole community that the investigation into Mr. Ruffin's killing will be comprehensive, unbiased, and transparent." In the overwhelming majority of police killings, more than 1,000 every year in the US, such investigations result in a whitewash.

Workers and youth in the state suffering from mental health issues will find it harder to find the help they need after Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers announced \$70 million in spending cuts across 18 state agencies in May, including nearly \$7.5 million from the Department of Health Services (DHS).

The cuts to DHS are the second largest out of all the departments, only topped by the \$40.8 million cut from the University of Wisconsin School System. Evers, working with his Republican colleagues in announcing the cuts, made sure to note that no new taxes would be implemented or raised.

In an interview with *Spectrum News 1*, Department of Administration Secretary Joel Brennan defended the cuts, "Everybody is giving up something, in their own household, in their own community, and as a state government Governor Evers has pushed us all to do what we can in a proactive way."

While schools and mental health will not be spared from cuts, certain departments are off limits, including the largest state agency, with a budget of over \$12 billion, the Department of Corrections.

"We're not going to take a lapse in the Department of Corrections or cut things in the Department of Corrections that are going to make people feel less secure in their communities," Brennan explained.

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