
April 23, 2024



**Iowa Attorney General's Review
of Officer Involved Death**

Incident of March 16, 2024

Fort Dodge, Iowa

Fort Dodge Police Department Officer Matthew English

Subject Involved: Tyler Stansberry

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Executive Summary

The Iowa Attorney General's Office concludes that the fatal shooting of Tyler Stansberry by law enforcement on March 16, 2024, was legally justified.

The officers responded to a 911 call to the Stansberry home after family reported Stansberry was acting violently and having a mental-health episode. Stansberry had an outstanding arrest warrant for a probation violation involving a domestic-abuse case. He was agitated, armed with a knife, and inside a house with animals (one of which he was reported to have injured) and another person. His family had, the day before, obtained a court order for his involuntary mental-health commitment because of his erratic behavior.

Officers attempted to deescalate the situation. They first used a family member to speak with Stansberry and then, approximately twenty minutes later, attempted to speak with him directly. When they eventually made their way to the home's basement, Stansberry suddenly charged at them from hiding from only a few feet away, armed with knives in each hand. The officers reasonably believed that Stansberry was a serious and immediate threat to their lives and that deadly force was reasonably required to stop the threat. The Attorney General's Office therefore concludes that criminal charges are not warranted and considers the investigation to be closed.

Process and Authority

Law enforcement officers fatally shot Tyler Stansberry at approximately 9:00 a.m. on March 16, 2024, in the basement of a residence located at 1525 4th Avenue South, Fort Dodge, Webster County, Iowa. The incident involved four Fort Dodge police officers who responded to an emergency call for assistance from a family member.

The Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation investigated the incident, and its investigation is complete. DCI interviewed the officers involved and reviewed the officers' body cameras. DCI interviewed members of the Stansberry family and another witness inside the residence. They secured photographs, and video recordings, and gathered other evidence from the Stansberry home, Fort Dodge Police Department, and the medical examiner.

The Attorney General's Office has authority under Iowa Code § 13.12 to assess any officer-involved death to determine whether criminal charges are warranted. The Office has had a full opportunity to review the findings of the investigation and discuss the investigation with the assigned agent. All law enforcement reports, including any audio or video recordings, will be returned to DCI when this report is issued.

Pertinent Facts

A. History

Stansberry reportedly suffered from autism, schizophrenia, PTSD, Aspergers Syndrome, and social anxiety. He had two prior involuntary mental health commitments. In 2019, Stansberry armed himself with a machete and barricaded himself inside the family home. His mental health had deteriorated since then, particularly in the year before the incident. He refused to visit doctors or take his medications as prescribed. He would often use marijuana and mix alcohol with over-the-counter medicines. Stansberry had a history of aggressive behavior including assaulting family members, harming animals, and engaging in self-harm.

The day before the shooting, Stansberry's mother requested, and received, an order Stansberry's involuntarily committing Stansbury because of his behavior and deteriorating mental condition, but the order had not been shared with law enforcement. Stansberry's mother informed him that law enforcement might be coming to the house. She did so because Stansberry acted aggressively when he did not get what he wanted or was forced to do something. The night before the incident, Stansberry had been drinking alcoholic beverages and did not sleep.

B. Timeline.

1. Request for help and initial entry into the home.

On March 16, 2024, at approximately 8:40 a.m., Webster County 911 dispatch received a call from Stansberry's brother. Stansberry's brother reported that Stansberry was having a mental-health crisis episode. He stated that Stansberry was hurting a dog and that he needed law enforcement's help because Stansberry had assaulted him. Stansberry's brother repeated that he needed help to control his brother and remove him from the property. He reported that the family had filed papers with the court to remove Stansberry. He stated that Stansberry was "freaking out" and repeated that Stansberry was hurting his dog "right now."

Fort Dodge Police Department Officers Nicholas Ruggles and Matthew English responded to the Stansberry family home at 1525 4th Avenue South. They were not familiar with the Stansberry home or any members of the Stansberry family. Stansberry's brother spoke with them outside the home, reporting that he woke up to his brother hurting his dog, that Stansberry was "flipping out" and that two other dogs as well as his own girlfriend were in the house. He asked the officers to remove Stansberry from the property. He reported that a judge had signed commitment papers the day before. He stated, "this is bad" and "I hope he does not have weapons."

After speaking with Stansberry's brother, Officers Ruggles and English entered the house with Stansberry's brother. They and

Stansberry's brother called Stansberry's name, but there was no response. After searching the main level of the house, Stansberry's brother told officers Stansberry was in the basement. Stansberry's brother walked to the basement stairs and called down to ask if Stansberry would come upstairs. Stansberry did not respond or come upstairs.

Stansberry's brother asked if the officers wanted Stansberry to come from the basement to the main level of the home. They told him yes and remained on the main level of the home while Stansberry's brother briefly went down the stairs and into the basement. When he came back up the stairs, he stated that Stansberry had a weapon that might be a knife. The officers had Stansberry's brother leave the house. They followed and closed the front door behind them.

2. Discussions with Stansberry's family.

A few minutes later, Stansberry's mother arrived home in her vehicle. The officers and Stansberry's brother were standing outside the home. She reported to officers there was a court order and said, "You guys were supposed to come pick him up." Officer Ruggles shared with Ms. Stansberry that Stansberry was armed with a knife. Officer Ruggles added that they had closed the front door because Stansberry was armed, making a barricade between him and the officers necessary. Ms. Stansberry repeated that Stansberry suffered from mental-health

conditions and that her other son's girlfriend and the other family dogs were inside the house. She stated that Stansberry would "not do anything" and would not go to the hospital and get help.

Officer Ruggles mentioned Stansberry's active probation-violation arrest warrant. Ms. Stansberry reported that Stansberry had, two years ago, attacked her and been charged with domestic assault. He had been required to complete classes but had not. She further stated that Stansberry had been very angry with her dogs, though she did not know why, and that Stansberry and her other son had gotten into physical altercations because Stansberry had "come after her."

Stansberry's brother stated that, before the police had arrived, Stansberry had pushed him, nearly causing him to fall. Ms. Stansberry stated that the last time Stansberry's brother had wanted to call law enforcement because of Stansberry's behavior, Stansberry had stated that he would kill his brother if the police came again.

Sgt. Mathew Webb and Officer Andrew Lane arrived to assist. To avoid further upsetting Stansberry, they did not use their lights and sirens. Like Officer English and Officer Ruggles, neither Sgt. Webb nor Officer Lane were familiar with the Stansberrys or their residence. Officer English briefed the other officers on the situation, including that Stansberry was armed with a knife.

3. The officers re-enter the home and confront Stansberry.

Approximately twenty minutes after Officers English and Ruggles had arrived, the four officers entered the home through the front door. All four officers wore badges and clearly identifiable police uniforms. Officer Ruggles entered the house first with a police shield in one hand and his Taser in the other. Behind him, in line, were Officer English, armed with his 9mm revolver; Officer Lane, armed with a shotgun loaded with a beanbag round; and Sgt. Webb, armed with his loaded revolver. They searched the first floor of the home, calling Stansberry's name, but he did not respond, and they did not find him. They then walked to the basement stairs.

The stairs to the basement are narrow and steep. They spiral downward to the right and the ceiling above the stairs is low. There is a bathroom at the bottom of the stairs; down a six-foot-wide hallway is another room, the entrance to which was covered with a curtain or blanket.

The officers called Stansberry's name downstairs and asked him to come talk to them. He did not respond. Officers Ruggles, English, and Lane walked down the basement stairs. Sgt. Webb remained on the stairs. The officers searched the bathroom at the bottom of the stairs, but Stansberry was not there. They again called Stansberry's name.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Tyler ran, screaming, from behind the curtain directly towards the officers. His arms were raised and he was

armed with a steak knife in each hand. There was little time for officers to respond before Stansberry closed the roughly twelve-foot gap between himself and the officers. Almost simultaneously, and just before Stansberry reached Officer Ruggles, the officers fired—Officer Ruggles with his Taser, Officer Lane with his shotgun, and Officer English twice with his revolver.

Stansberry was hit and fell to the floor. He remained combative and resisted the officers, who attempted to restrain him. They ordered multiple times to show his hands so they could secure the knives, but he did not comply and instead struggled with the officers. They eventually secured his hands with handcuffs. They then recovered the steak knives from under his chest and secured them.

The officers checked Stansberry to see whether he had been shot and discovered he had a gunshot wound to the chest. (It was later discovered that he had been hit by the Taser, the beanbag round, and two bullets.) They remained with him until medical personnel from the Fort Dodge Fire Department arrived to treat his injuries. Stansberry was taken to the hospital where he later died from gunshot wounds.

Applicable Law

To be justified, the force an officer uses must be reasonable. Force is reasonable if a reasonable person, in like circumstances, would judge the force to be necessary to prevent an injury or loss. It can include deadly force if (1) it is reasonable to believe that such force is necessary to avoid injury or risk to the person's or another person's life or safety and (2) it is reasonable to believe that such force is necessary to resist a like force or threat. Iowa Code §§ 704.1, 704.2, and 704.3.

In *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386 (1989), the United States Supreme Court held that the use of deadly force by a police officer must be evaluated from the perspective of a reasonable police officer on the scene and in the same circumstances. Under *Graham*, reasonableness of police use of force cannot be evaluated from the perspective of a civilian or the perspective afforded by 20/20 hindsight. The Court further stated that the fact that law enforcement officers are often required to react quickly in tense, uncertain, and rapidly evolving situations are factors that must be considered in determining reasonableness. Since *Graham*, the Supreme Court has narrowed the analysis to focus on the exact moment that the force was applied.

Analysis

The officers' actions, including those of Officer English, who fired the fatal rounds, were legally justified. Their decision to fire at Stansberry when he charged at them from a few feet away while armed with a knife in each hand was reasonable under the circumstances.

The officers knew that Stansberry had a history of violence, had been violent that day, had been mixing over-the-counter medicines with marijuana and alcohol, and was armed with at least one deadly weapon. They also knew that Stansberry was in the family home with at least one other person. They nevertheless attempted to resolve the situation peacefully, speaking to Stansberry through a family member rather than doing so directly and appealing to him to come speak with them rather than immediately confronting him. They resorted to force only when Stansberry, without provocation, charged at them from concealment from only a few feet away, armed with a knife in each hand.

Even after being tased, struck by a beanbag round, and shot by two bullets, Stansberry continued to resist the officers. Had the officers, including Officer English, not used lethal force, they would have likely suffered serious injury or death, and Stansberry would have continued to present an imminent deadly threat to Sgt. Webb; to his brother's girlfriend, who was still in the house; and to his mother and brother, who remained outside. Particularly given the short time they had to react to Stansberry's sudden, imminent threat of deadly violence, the officers

used the force necessary to prevent death or serious injury to themselves and others in the area.

Conclusion

The Iowa Attorney General's Office concludes that law-enforcement officers' actions in this incident were legally justified and that criminal charges are unwarranted. It considers the criminal investigation into this incident to be closed.