

After loved ones are killed by police, Utah families say they are left in the dark

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On Thursday, he was shot by police.

Friday passed. Then Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday.

Andrey Tkachenko's family members knew he was dead, but they didn't know why. Police wouldn't even tell them where the 23-year-old's body was for days, and it was funeral home staff who eventually helped the family find him.

"Nobody called. Nobody says nothing," said his mother, Lyubov Tkachenko. "I can't understand."

Tkachenko was shot and killed by a fugitive-apprehension task force in Salt Lake City in 2018, when police in Utah killed 19 people. That level of lethal force, according to Salt Lake Tribune records, was the highest in recent years.

Seven months after the Oct. 18 shooting, Tkachenko's loved ones still don't know what the two officers say caused them to open fire. They don't know if Tkachenko, who was on parole, had a warrant out for his arrest, or what crime it may have alleged.

As the Utah attorney general's office investigates why 2018 was such a deadly year, focusing on possible improvements to police training and policies, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah is calling for a broader look that includes families of those shot by police.

Investigators and prosecutors have generally resisted providing details immediately after police shootings, saying that could compromise investigations, influence witness recollections, or violate the rights of people involved. But with some grieving families waiting months and even years for information, advocates are calling for more timely transparency — and have won some victories, like a mayoral order in Salt Lake City to release body camera footage within 10 days of an officer's use of deadly force.

Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes has told local agencies that maintaining "a high level of public trust" is one reason for his investigation. Watchdog groups have long argued that prolonged silence breeds mistrust of police, invites speculation and precludes public accountability.

Families also often struggle with unanswered questions and face resistance from police if they press for more information, the ACLU said in a report last week.

"To build public trust, you need to engage with the members of the public with firsthand experience about the immediate and long-term impact of these fatal incidents," ACLU spokesman Jason Stevenson said.

Tkachenko was killed after a task force of local police and federal agents chased two cars into an alley. He was driving one of the cars and was shot four times in the side. Police have said they found a gun at the scene, but not where it was located, and haven't said what preceded the shooting.

When Lyubov Tkachenko found out her eldest son was dead, her blood pressure spiked. She started shaking, and she had to go to an emergency room. About a week later, her husband, Sergey Israyelyan, said her face had been wet with tears since she got the news.

At her son's funeral, she was inconsolable, draping her body over the open casket and wailing. She kept asking, sometimes to no one in particular, why the officers had fired.

Sergey Israyelyan said Thursday that he is consulting with attorneys almost weekly to obtain any video of the shooting that killed his stepson, but that the process has been slowed because prosecutors are still investigating whether the shooting was justified.

The silence, while common during investigations, has him suspicious of the police motives. "If they have nothing to hide," he said, "they'll release it."

Family members of Cody Belgard, killed by Salt Lake City police Nov. 9, held a sit-in at Mayor Jackie Biskupski's office in January because they weren't getting answers to their questions about the shooting.

Biskupski declined to meet with them because the family wanted her to "intervene in an independent investigation," a spokesman said, which she cannot do.

Prosecutors haven't decided whether the shooting was justified. Marvin Oliveros, Belgard's brother, told the ACLU his family has received little support or transparency from the police departments that investigated.

"After we made public records requests and asked for more bodycam footage, we stopped getting calls back," he said in the ACLU's report. "At some point, we felt like we were being hung up on."



The parents of 19-year-old Zane James have similar questions about their son's death and filed a lawsuit in federal court last week to get answers. In May 2018, James was shot about two blocks from their home in Cottonwood Heights.

They want to know: Why did Officer Casey Davies decide to chase James when he wasn't on duty? Why didn't police interview neighbors who saw the confrontation? Most important: Why did Davies shoot?

Davies decided not to speak with prosecutors about the shooting. They declined to file charges against him, based in part on statements from other officers that appeared to show that Davies used lethal force because he felt he needed to protect himself or others.

But Aaron James said his family members have questions that go beyond the prosecutors' review, and they have been shocked by the silence they've encountered.

"We know all these guys. They are resource officers that Zane went to school with. We've been in the neighborhood for 11 years," Aaron James said. "... What happened, gentlemen? What happened? And no one wants to say anything to us."

Aaron and his wife, Tiffany James, said they were once the kind of people who believed in the social contract officers made by joining a police force, and that officers would protect and serve citizens through the good and the bad.

"We were the parents that trusted the police," Tiffany James said, "and told our children to respect the police."

Not anymore.

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