

# Autistic teen fatally shot by police in suburban Chicago home

Shane Feratu  
13 March 2012

Fifteen-year-old Stephon Watts was shot and killed in his home by Calumet City Police officers on February 1. In an attempt to contain and defuse public outrage at the young man's death, media outlets have sought to downplay the child's multiple mental illness diagnoses and emphasize police reports and protocols excusing Watts's death. Stephon was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder, at age nine.

The young boy's death is a result of the total breakdown of the most basic mental health services available to working families in many areas of the US. In budget-strapped states like Illinois, deep cuts have forced the closure of numerous mental health facilities, replacing mental health care with law enforcement, resulting in the criminalization of those in need of care.

The day he was killed, Stephon told his father, Steven Watts, that he didn't want to go to school. Watts's father took the young man's computer away and locked it in a cabinet in the basement. An argument broke out between the boy and his father, who called a police non-emergency number, which he had been instructed to do by social services representatives whenever Stephon became "agitated." The police had made 12 previous visits to the home since 2010, and were familiar with the teen's mental illness.

Two of the five officers entered the house and found the teenager in the basement attempting to pry open the locked cabinet with a knife. According to the police, Watts was holding a "kitchen knife." However, two news sources and the child's father reported that he was holding only a butter knife. Watts reportedly made a superficial cut on the arm of one of the officers before he was shot.

Watts was declared dead at the hospital. The Lake County, Indiana, coroner's office declared the cause of death to be multiple gunshot wounds to the torso.

Watts's mother and family went to the police station to confront the police about why they resorted to using a deadly weapon instead of a Taser, which police had used on Watts before in earlier incidents at the home.

"They murdered my son...decided to kill him," said Stephon's mother, Danelene Powell-Watts, a Ford auto plant worker. "They're trained to disarm people," Watts's father said. "Why did they have to use deadly force on a 15-year-old autistic kid?"

Police Chief Gilmore first said there were no Tasers on hand, but it was later found that only the lead officer in the residence did not have a Taser, and the second officer in the residence was carrying one. According to Gilmore, the Watts residence had been identified as having "an autistic young man there who is very strong and likes to fight with the police."

All 84 Calumet City police officers had gone through training on how to deal with individuals suffering from autism. Gilmore made comments that the policemen did exactly what they were trained to do, regardless of the fact that they knew about the teenager's problems.

"At that time, cornered and having no way to retreat back up the stairs, the officers fired one shot each, striking the [boy] twice," Gilmore said. "Unfortunately, the officer thought that his life was in jeopardy."

On February 19, hundreds of people attended the funeral service for Watts on the far South Side of Chicago. A distraught Steven Watts was unable to leave the car until his son's funeral was well under way.

According to Bishop Lance Davis, "The father's more concerned and remorseful about the fact that he opened the door for the police department." The Watts family has said police have not been responsive to their requests. Both police officers are on paid leave while an investigation is reported to be under way.

Before Watts's parents would be allowed to admit their son to a mental health facility, the facility asked that they call the police and have a police record on file for the cause of the admission. This is a perfect example of the inadequacy of the mental health care system, which does not provide adequate assistance to better cope with children and teenagers with mental disorders. By requiring the intervention of law enforcement, the danger is raised of the use of lethal and non-lethal force.

According to Illinois law, there are three ways of sending someone to the mental health facility. One method is to present a petition to the director of a mental health facility. A person may also be sent to a facility following a court order for involuntary admission, or if a judge, through testimony and observation, believes that a person needs immediately hospitalization.

A person 18 or older may also present a written petition to the director of a facility in the area and a police officer can place someone into custody and transport the individual to the facility and file a petition once there. Police officers have no requirement for minimum mental health training. A certification by a physician or someone equally qualified must be attached to the petition. If this document is not attached the patient may be held for 24 hours waiting for the evaluation, after which time he or she must be released.

Instead of raising taxes on the wealthy to expand the limited and aging mental health facilities, Illinois Democratic governor Pat Quinn has announced closures through 2013 of about 24 mental health and social services facilities across the state. Centers for the developmentally disabled, including Mabley Developmental Center and Jacksonville Development Center, which was closed last month, have been affected.

Quinn proposed \$2.7 billion be cut from the state's Medicaid fund, which will negatively affect the poorest residents of Illinois. Major facilities in Rockford, Chester and Tinley Park will be shuttered, hundreds of jobs will be lost and patients will be displaced, contributing to poor oversight and overcrowding.

A total of 1,938 people will lose their jobs. Patients in the closed facilities will be transferred to already overcrowded facilities or be released to care for themselves. This lack of resources will exacerbate the

already difficult situations for the mentally ill and their families. It also makes it very difficult for workers to seek needed mental health services under the extremely stressful conditions of the current social and economic crisis.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**