

Mentally ill double amputee shot to death by Houston police

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26 September 2012

A Houston Police Department (HPD) officer shot to death Brian Claunch, a mentally ill and wheelchair-bound double amputee, as he sat in his wheelchair at the East End personal care home in Houston Saturday. Police had been called to the home because Claunch had become agitated, allegedly because his caregiver refused to give him a soft drink and a cigarette.

HPD authorities said that the shooter, Matthew Marin, felt he and his partner were threatened because Claunch was waving a silver pen, making stabbing motions at two officers with it. Claunch, they said, had one of the officers trapped in a corner.

They claim that Claunch ignored their orders and verbally threatened them and other occupants of the home. He was then shot in the head by Marin.

Claunch, who was in his mid-40s, reportedly suffered from bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, according to the head of the Healing Hands Care Center, John Garcia.

Seeking to quell mass anger over the incident, on Monday Houston Police Chief Charles McClelland asked the FBI to investigate the shooting. McClelland told FBI Special Agent in Charge Stephen Morris on Saturday morning that there was a shooting of a “violent person.”

Texas staff attorney Wayne Krause Yang said, “TCRP is very concerned about what policies and training led two fully armed police officers to lose control of a situation with a man with one arm, one leg, one felt tip pen that should have been routinely handled.”

Claunch had need of the wheelchair after he lost his lower right leg and his entire left arm after being hit by a train. In February 2003, a probate court judge ruled that he had become incapacitated by mental illness and could no longer care for himself, whereupon Claunch

became a ward of the state.

Claunch was the third unarmed person shot by Houston police in less than three months. The other two were so-called “waistband shootings” in which the police declared that the victim was reaching for something—assumed to be a weapon—in his waistband, forcing the officer to shoot.

On July 9, Rufino Lara, 54, an illegal immigrant from El Salvador, was fatally shot by a female HPD officer. The officer shot Lara when he turned around to face her. A search reportedly showed Lara had a beer can concealed in his waistband, but civil rights activists say they are suspicious of this claim, citing eyewitnesses who said Lara's hands were placed against a wall before he spun around.

On September 16, an unarmed 26-year-old man was shot in the leg after he reached for a cellphone in his waistband that officers took for a gun. This man had a history of mental illness and suicide attempts.

The level of police violence is escalating. In all of 2011, there were 21 shooting incidents involving the Houston police in which nine people were killed. Through July 25 of this year, before the most recent incidents, there had already been 14 shootings with 7 deaths.

Marin was involved in two previous violent incidents with civilians—a shooting in October 2009 and an alleged assault in 2008.

Harris County District Attorney Pat Lykos has said that most of the shootings this year involved suspects who threatened or evaded the police. The emotionally loaded words “suspect” and “threat” are routinely employed by the police in police killing cases in an attempt to draw the attention away from police responsibility.

As elsewhere, Houston police involved in shootings

of civilians are rarely called to account. The last police officer in Harris County to be charged in a shooting was Sgt. Jeffrey Cotton, who was acquitted by a jury in May 2010 for shooting an unarmed man outside the man's own home in Bellaire.



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