Phoenix police shoot 50-year-old woman during mental health call

Diana Green
29 August 2014

Police in Phoenix, Arizona shot and killed Michelle Cusseaux, a 50-year-old mentally ill woman, on August 13 as they were attempting take her in to a psychiatric facility following a court order. Officers claimed she threatened them with a hammer.

Hours after Cusseaux's funeral on August 23, Phoenix Police Chief Daniel V. Garcia called a press conference to announce that he would have the Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS) investigate the shooting. Days before he had refused the request by her family for an investigation by an outside agency.

Standing with Mayor Greg Stanton and City Manager Ed Zuercher, Garcia spoke of the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri in response to the police killing of an unarmed young man, and stated, "The decision I made to have an independent department do this investigation will benefit our city, but it is bigger than the city of Phoenix." Stanton added, "What matters most is that the public has complete trust."

The day before Cusseaux's funeral, her family and supporters marched her casket from Phoenix City Hall to the US attorney's office to protest her shooting and the absence of an independent investigation.

Michelle's mother Francis Garret was the one who called mental health services to get her ailing daughter into an inpatient mental health facility. She said her daughter suffered from depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

"This was the result," said Garret. "I didn't phone them and ask for my daughter to be killed. I did not ask for Michelle to be another statistic here, another homicide. I did not call them for that reason."

Alicia Thompson, Cusseaux's friend, told a local newspaper, "What happened was unnecessary, but now that it happened, we need to have a conversation of what police are equipped to do in situations like this. A bullet should have been the very last thing to have been used on Michelle."

Michelle Cusseaux lived in the Maryvale area of West Phoenix. In the 1980s the police began to focus on this neighborhood for its drug and gang activities. The area is blighted by urban decay as suburban growth has moved west and south. What was once the main shopping center, the Maryvale Mall, now houses schools and a police station.

According to police shooting statistics for 2011, Arizona was one of the 10 most deadly states and Phoenix was one of the 10 most deadly cities. Arizona had 45 police shootings with 27 deaths. Phoenix had 15 shootings with 10 deaths. These are absolute numbers, not taking into account the fact that Arizona has a relatively low population, being the 16th most populous state according to the 2010 census.

There have been 31 cases of police shootings so far this year in Phoenix. The usual response to a law enforcement shooting in Maricopa County appears to be the same whether or not the person shot represented an immediate threat to an officer. The media accepts the prepackaged police version and predictable Maricopa County attorney's findings without question.

Retired Mesa police officer Bill Richardson wrote in the *Arizona Republic*, "I recently reviewed the January 2013 Phoenix police homicide investigation of Quintine Barksdale, an unarmed black man shot to death by an off-duty white police officer with a history of integrity and misconduct issues. Shortly after the shooting the officer was fired for unrelated serious misconduct.

"Even though determining justification is the duty of the county attorney, Phoenix police concluded early on the shooting was a 'justifiable homicide.' Predictably, the county attorney quietly rubber-stamped the Police

Department's misguided conclusion."

Even if the DPS conducts an "outside" investigation into Michelle Cusseaux's shooting death, there is little doubt that they will draw the same conclusion that an internal city police investigation would and that the county attorney will rubber-stamp it as a "justifiable homicide".

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact