What happened to Natasha McKenna?

Once again, Fairfax law enforcement officials leave the public in the dark.

AFTER A delay of more than two weeks, law enforcement agencies in Fairfax County have issued a statement about the case of Natasha McKenna, a mentally ill 37-year-old who died this month after sheriff’s deputies in the county jail shot her repeatedly with a stun gun.

The statement, jointly released by the sheriff’s office, which runs the jail, and the police department, which is investigating Ms. McKenna’s death, is offered by authorities as evidence of their commitment to openness — a quality glaringly absent in other recent deaths of unarmed civilians at the hands of Fairfax officers.

Unfortunately, the statement sheds little light on the circumstances surrounding Ms. McKenna’s violent, senseless death. In fact, it raises more questions.

Six sheriff’s deputies from an elite squad known as the Sheriff’s Emergency Response Team entered Ms. McKenna’s jail cell on Feb. 3, intending to transport her to Alexandria, where she was wanted on a warrant for felony assault on a police officer. The deputies, including two supervisors, were aware that Ms. McKenna, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia as a child, might violently resist; according to the statement, she had assaulted a deputy at the jail three days earlier.

Nonetheless, Ms. McKenna, the mother of a 7-year-old daughter, could not have presented an unmanageable challenge to six men specially trained in extracting prisoners from cells. She was about 5 feet 2 inches and 130 pounds, according to a lawyer subsequently hired by her family.

So why was it necessary to shoot her with a stun gun repeatedly — as many as five times, according to the family’s lawyer? Did any of the deputies have training in crisis intervention, specifically dealing with mentally ill people? Were they even aware of Ms. McKenna’s mental illness? The authorities aren’t saying.

Was the deputy allegedly assaulted by
Ms. McKenna in the Jan. 31 incident at the jail among the six who tried to remove her from her cell on Feb. 3? Will the sheriff’s office or the police release the identities of the six deputies? If so, when?

And why have the deputies not been placed on probation pending the outcome of the investigation, a move that would be routine for many law enforcement agencies following such an incident?

A 45-minute video was made of the incident, starting with the attempt to remove Ms. McKenna from her cell and ending when she was taken by ambulance to a local hospital, where she died five days later without regaining consciousness. When will the police or sheriff’s office release the video, along with the jail’s incident reports on the extraction and the alleged earlier assault? (Reports say Ms. McKenna may also have been struck by a deputy in that incident.)

It is unacceptable that the public remains in the dark about the circumstances of Ms. McKenna’s death. Fairfax Sheriff Stacey A. Kincaid, an elected official responsible for the jail, says she is committed to transparency. So does Edwin C. Roessler Jr., the Fairfax County police chief. They have yet to make good on that commitment.
Politics without honor

The latest attacks on Mr. Obama say more about the attackers than about the president.

The statement, jointly released by the sheriff's office and the Wisconsin Department of Justice, described Ms. McKenna as a mentally ill woman who was shot after coronavirus. Ms. McKenna was shot in the neck and died later in the hospital.

What happened to Natasha McKenna?

Once again, police have not released documents that leave the public in the dark.

A 45-minute video was made of the incident, a lawyer subsequently hired by her family. The statement says Ms. McKenna, the mother of a 10-year-old son, was shot in the neck and died later in the hospital.

Local opinions

Does the DC LGBT community have an ally or a token-grade leader in Mayor Bowser?

Washington, D.C.

The writer is executive director of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. The organization's website is CSW.org.

Letters to the Editor

Ethiopia deserves a free press

The Ethiopian government's duty is to protect all people's rights, including the right to free speech. The government should allow the Ethiopian Journalists Union to operate freely.

Clearing the air on climate change

Climate change is real, and we need to act now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The United States should lead the way in addressing this crisis.

Don't let profits dicker health care

The law was passed in response to the public's demand for affordable health care. The law has been criticized for not going far enough, but it is a step in the right direction.

Tewodros Abebe

Alexis Stoumbelis

The Washington Post

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No way to treat a person

Natasha McKenna was subjected to brutality, a video shows.

Among Natasha McKenna’s last words — or, perhaps, her last intelligible ones — were: “You promised me that you wouldn’t kill me. I didn’t do anything.”

That was all she had a chance to say before a six-man team of white-suited sheriff’s deputies, their faces obscured by helmets and visors, hauled Ms. McKenna, who was naked, from a cell at the Fairfax County jail. A short while later, after an 18-minute struggle to restrain her in which she was shot four times with a Taser, Ms. McKenna became unresponsive. She died five days later.

A video of the incident was released Thursday by Sheriff Stacey A. Kincaid. It is a chilling thing to watch.

What’s striking is not that the deputies used excessive violence with Ms. McKenna — they pinned her down and kneeled on her but didn’t seem intent on hurting her. The incident is brutal — six men manhandling an average-size woman — but it does not show punching or chokeholds.

The real problem is that it was the wrong approach to take with a woman, diagnosed since childhood with schizophrenia, who was mentally ill. Ms. McKenna is approached and treated as if she were a creature from an alien galaxy, not a human being.

In the video, which lasts more than 45 minutes, no trained mental health professional is present to assist with her extraction from her cell. No deputy tries to speak with her. No tactic beyond force is contemplated.

While Ms. McKenna was reportedly a difficult inmate — in earlier incidents at the jail, officials said, she scratched, fought, bit and threw urine at deputies — in the video she does not appear possessed of “super-human” or “demonic” strength, which deputies later attributed to her.

In the end, unable to secure her legs in a specially designed chair, one of the deputies shot her with a Taser — twice in the leg, twice in the arm. Minutes later, Ms. McKenna seemed to lose consciousness, although deputies seemed not to respond to that reality for about 12 minutes.

Ms. Kincaid, the sheriff, released the
video after prosecutor Raymond F. Morrogh decided not to bring charges against the deputies. In releasing it, she said it was her “responsibility to ensure something like this never happens again.”

To that end, Ms. Kincaid said she has ordered a review of policies and procedures — something she has been promising for months. Let’s hope that review includes procedures covering Tasers, the use of which Ms. Kincaid suspended at the jail a few months ago.

The sheriff also pledged that henceforth deputies will receive crisis intervention training designed specifically to deal with mentally ill inmates, something she once dismissed as unnecessary for personnel working inside a jail.

That counts as progress, although it has been halting and unnecessarily slow. So does Ms. Kincaid’s announcement that her office will embark on what she called a thorough review of the incident leading to Ms. McKenna’s death.

Ms. Kincaid’s most important initiative — if it results in real reform — is her plan to divert mentally ill defendants into appropriate mental health treatment facilities. That would be the most effective way to prevent horrific incidents such as Ms. McKenna’s death.
Stumbling toward compassion

Bangladesh stepped up on the refugee crisis, but U.S. leadership remains lacking.

A

No way to treat a person

A video of the incident was released Thursday showing Ms. McKenna being manhandled by six-man team of white-suited sheriff's deputies, among others. She had just said her name after being awoken in the middle of the night, according to the video released by the Phoenix police. She was subjected to brutality, a video shows. The police have fired six of the eight deputies involved in the incident, according to a Phoenix police report.

Flunking the final exam

Montgomery County should see a way to reduce housing.

Taking exception

The EB-5 visa program is a bad idea.

Inheritance tax has been and continues to be an unwise policy.

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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

TREATMENT, NOT JAIL

In Fairfax, a fledgling plan to divert people with mental illness to the right programs.

N
ATASHA MCKENNA, the schizophrenic woman who died in February after Fairfax County jail guards shot her four times with a Taser, should not have been behind bars. She should have been in treatment at a facility staffed with mental health professionals.

Some county officials have acknowledged that; they include Sheriff Stacey A. Kincaid, who runs the jail, where some 40 percent of the 1,100 inmates suffer from mental illness or substance addiction. Now it’s time for Fairfax, whose 1.1 million people make it more populous than all but nine U.S. cities, to make reforms to ensure that senseless tragedies like Ms. McKenna’s death do not recur.

The question is whether county officials — not just Ms. Kincaid, but also prosecutors, public defenders, judges, police and others — have the political will to shake up an entrenched system and whether they will find the dollars to do it. It won’t be easy, and it won’t be quick, but failing to act would be a disgrace.

The county has a plan to establish a fledgling program, starting Jan. 1, to divert nonviolent people who have mental illness to a county-run crisis center in Merrifield. Rather than jailing them, police officers, trained to detect the signs of mental health crises, would be able to hand them off to a team of professional staff at the center for evaluation and formulation of a treatment plan.

That sounds simple enough; in fact it will require several million dollars just to inaugurate what amounts to a pilot program — money that would go to training hundreds of cops and sheriff’s deputies as well as to providing the staff to run the center 16 hours a day. At a guess, hundreds, and quite possibly a few thousand, people with mental illness could avoid incarceration annually. Instead they would be channeled into state and private hospitals, facilities and treatment programs, including ones monitored by the courts.

The advantages of such a system are many. One would be better outcomes for mentally ill individuals for whom jail is just
a revolving door to trouble. Another would be cost-saving for the county, which could more efficiently deploy police officers and others whose time is now too often monopolized tending to crisis for which they lack adequate training.

There are models elsewhere in the country of programs that have successfully diverted large numbers of people who would otherwise clog the jails. One is in Bexar County, Tex., which includes San Antonio. There, officials estimate that the county saves several million dollars annually as a result of decreasing the jail’s inmate population and hospital emergency room admissions.

Last spring, Fairfax applied for a $1.5 million state grant to establish a diversion program, but officials in Richmond determined that the county had not laid the necessary groundwork — establishing policies and coordination among various agencies — to implement the program. The county has gone back to the drawing board and allotted $400,000 of its own funds to get the pilot program rolling next year.

That’s a start, but it is a modest one. It remains to be seen whether circuit court judges, prosecutors and other leaders will play ball, which will be necessary to design and implement a full-fledged program to get mentally ill individuals the care and monitoring they desperately need.
Treatment, not jail

In Harris County, a fledgling plan to divert people with mental illness to the right programs.

Next steps for Ferguson

Construction sites for tearing down the charred community forward.

The end of globalization?

An international trade show, the U.S. must ramp up the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal.

TAKING EXCEPTION

President's push to democracy

In a country threatened by a wave of authoritarianism, it's important to remember that democracies can be resilient. As the president's administration continues to push for democratic values at home and abroad, it is crucial that we support and defend these principles.
Jamycheal Mitchell’s ghastly death

For want of a bed in a psychiatric hospital, a young man who shoplifted $5 of goods wasted away in jail.

For want of an available bed in a state psychiatric hospital, Jamycheal Mitchell, a mentally ill young man in Virginia who shoplifted a soda and two snacks worth $5.05 from a 7-Eleven, wasted away behind bars for four months, all but ignored by jail staff who should have noticed his catastrophically deteriorating health. Incoherent, emaciated and filthy, he died in his cell in August. Police are now investigating.

Mr. Mitchell’s ghastly death, at age 24, is all the more senseless given that the closest state psychiatric facility, Eastern State Hospital, in Williamsburg, should have had a bed available for him.

In fact, of Eastern State’s fewer than 300 psychiatric patients, some two dozen faced no criminal charges and had been designated as ready for discharge even as Mr. Mitchell languished at the Hampton Roads Regional Jail. Despite that, those patients remained at Eastern State, occupying scarce beds while a judge repeatedly ordered Mr. Mitchell transferred from the jail to the hospital.

There are several causes for the gridlock at Eastern State, the largest state psychiatric hospital in Virginia, and other similar facilities around the commonwealth. One is a sharp spike in demand for beds resulting from legislation last year that compels state psychiatric hospitals to admit patients in the event of mental-health crises. Heavy demand is compounded by a shortage of options for the mentally ill who are no longer clinically required to stay in the hospital. In many cases, patients deemed ready for discharge remain stuck in the hospital because there is no suitable housing or care (including skilled nurses, social workers or psychiatrists) in their home communities. That reflects inadequate funding by state and local government.

In the latest census of Eastern State, in September, some 40 patients — more than half of whom face no criminal charges — were designated as “ready for discharge” for weeks and often months.
Had they departed, a psychiatric bed and suitable treatment would have been available for Mr. Mitchell. Instead, he withered in jail, unconscionably neglected. In the account of fellow inmates and his relatives, as reported by The Post’s Justin Jouvenal, the horrors endured by Mr. Mitchell were Dickensian. He lost at least 36 pounds. He cast off his clothes and was often smeared with his own filth. He urinated on his cell floor. His legs swelled — “elephant like,” in the description of an inmate who worked in his cell block.

As Mr. Mitchell’s health declined, Judge Morton V. Whitlow of Portsmouth General District Court ordered him transferred to Eastern State. The judge issued the order May 21, and reiterated it May 29 and again July 31, in a court hearing after which Mr. Mitchell’s relatives were so stunned at his appearance that one of them, his aunt, begged jail officials to send him to the emergency room. Her plea was evidently ignored.

The mentally ill population has soared in jails across the United States as states, enamored of deinstitutionalization, have closed psychiatric hospitals. In Virginia, fewer than 1,300 beds remain in state psychiatric facilities, down from some 6,000 in the mid-1970s.

As Mr. Mitchell’s case illustrates, jails are ill-equipped to treat the mentally ill. Yet without adequate resources allotted for care in local communities, jails will continue to warehouse people who need help, not confinement.
Jamycheal Mitchell’s ghastly death
For want of a bed in a psychiatric hospital, a young man who should have lived away in jail.

The writer is president of the AFL-CIO.

The Washington Post
AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Dangers in the vacuum
The U.S. has invested too much in Afghanistan to see it fall.

The writer is a former chairman of the D.C. Council.

The Washington Post
AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

The veto threat
Despite some reasonable objections, President Obama should sign the defense authorization bill.

The writer is a former chairman of the D.C. Council.

The Washington Post
AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

TAKING EXCEPTION
The “Godfather” is bad for working families

The writer is a former chairman of the D.C. Council.

The Washington Post
AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER
Why are you trying to kill me, man?’

More senseless death in police custody

THE DAY Linwood Lambert Jr. died in South Boston, Va., in May 2013, the police department there issued a curt news release with the headline “Subject Passes Away in Police Custody.” The announcement failed to mention that Mr. Lambert, 46, an African American man, died shortly after three white police officers shot him with Tasers 20 times in the space of about 30 minutes.

Other salient details were missing from the release, including the facts that he was Tasered repeatedly while sprawled at the entrance of a hospital emergency room and again minutes later, while he was shackled in a patrol car’s rear seat.

Video footage of the incident, released recently by a judge’s order and reported in depth by MSNBC, suggests it is a case study in abuse by police ignorant of best practices in the use of stun guns. Their actions violated guidelines, including the local police department’s own policy forbidding Taser-ing suspects in handcuffs. State police and prosecutors are investigating whether the officers, who have all been promoted since the incident, committed a crime.

Over a seven-year period in the 2000s, 334 people died in the United States after being shot by police using stun guns, according to Amnesty International USA; many more have died since then. Although coroners in such cases often attribute the deaths to other causes — in Mr. Lambert’s case, a medical examiner cited “acute cocaine intoxication” — the use and overuse of stun guns is often at least a contributing cause.

The incident involving Mr. Lambert unfolded when police in South Boston, a small town near the North Carolina border, went to a motel before dawn in response to noise complaints. They found Mr. Lambert there, delusional and acting oddly.

Handcuffed but assured he was not under arrest, Mr. Lambert was taken to a hospital where, upon arriving, he became agitated and kicked out the squad car’s rear window, bolted from the back seat and ran toward the emergency room entrance, crashing into its sliding glass doors.
three officers immediately pulled out their Tasers and began firing, not stopping even as Mr. Lambert writhed and moaned on the ground. One of them, Cpl. Tiffany Bratton, shot him 10 times in the space of two minutes, each shot delivering 50,000 volts. The Tasering continued even after Mr. Lambert, by now shackled at the ankles and reinserted in the squad car, slumped in the back seat.

Rather than seeking the medical attention Mr. Lambert needed, the police took him to jail. They seemed slow to notice when he lost consciousness en route; he was dead by the time he was returned to the hospital.

The officers’ actions flouted federal guidelines for the use of stun guns, including warnings that the jolts not exceed 15 seconds in total — Mr. Lambert was probably shocked for well over a minute; that subjects should not be shot with more than one Taser at a time; and that Tasers should not be used against suspects who are handcuffed or under the influence of drugs (which Mr. Lambert admitted to the police he was). Critically, guidelines stress that anyone shot repeatedly with stun guns get immediate medical attention. Mr. Lambert, Tasered at the hospital doorway, received none before he died.

“Why are you trying to kill me, man?” Mr. Lambert, supine, asked as the police Tasered him. Why, indeed.
Another vote for democracy

In Burma, the dictator apologists are proved wrong once again.

In 2010, the verdict was clear: the NLD had won the election, and it would be in power. The NLD had amassed a majority, and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was released from her long imprisonment. This was a moment of historical significance, a moment of hope for the Burmese people. It was a moment when the world could see that Burma was moving towards democracy.

But the NLD did not have an easy road to victory. The military junta, led by General Than Shwe, had ruled Burma since 1962, and its record was one of repression and violence. The NLD had been banned for decades, and its leaders had been arrested and imprisoned. But the NLD had persisted, and its message of democracy and human rights had resonated with the Burmese people.

The elections were not without their challenges. The military had tried to suppress the NLD's campaign, and there were reports of voter intimidation. But the NLD had emerged victorious, and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, had been released from her imprisonment.

The military junta had tried to challenge the results of the election, but its efforts were in vain. The NLD had won a clear majority, and its leader was released from her imprisonment. This was a moment of history, a moment when the world could see that Burma was moving towards democracy.

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