

Aunt of Saginaw man killed by police files wrongful death lawsuit

Updated Aug 05, 2020; Posted Aug 05, 2020

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SAGINAW, MI — The aunt of a man killed by police earlier this year has filed a federal wrongful death lawsuit against the City of Saginaw and several of its police officers.

Through attorney Jennifer G. Damico of Southfield-based Buckfire Law Firm, Mia Blaisdell on Monday, Aug. 3, filed her suit in U.S. District Court in Bay City. The suit names the City of Saginaw, Saginaw Police Chief Robert M. Ruth, Sgt. Nathaniel Voelker, and officers Jordan Engelhart, Robert Adams, Kathryn Jeffers-Mercer, and Vincent Jackson as defendants.

Mia Blaisdell is the aunt of Zane G. Blaisdell and the representative of his estate. Zane Blaisdell, 48, was shot and killed by Saginaw police officers who responded to a domestic violence call at Blaisdell's East Side home on Feb. 9. Blaisdell stabbed K9 unit Deebo in his head and was fatally shot by officers Engelhart and Adams. [Prosecutors ruled the shooting justified](#) and declined to issue any criminal charges against the officers involved.

In the suit, Mia Blaisdell alleges the officers "acted in concert with each other to cause the wrongful death of (Zane Blaisdell) and then conspired to distort and conceal the actual facts and circumstances regarding his death." The suit goes on to state Zane Blaisdell was "in the midst of a known mental health crisis" when officers threatened he would get bit by K9 Deebo, only for Deebo to then bite Blaisdell on both of his hands and his right thigh.

Zane Blaisdell tried defending himself "from an agonizingly painful and terrifying police dog assault and battery inside of his own home after the imminent threat to any person, the Defendants, or the public in general, had been extinguished," the suit states.

Zane Blaisdell suffered 12 gunshot wounds to his head, chest, neck, and shoulders, with the wounds indicating he was on the ground and on his back when he was shot, the suit alleges.

Through the suit, the estate is seeking compensation for funeral, medical, and hospital expenses, and for the pain and suffering Blaisdell experienced between suffering his injuries and death. The estate is also seeking damages for "the loss of continued love, society, companionship, comfort, affection, fellowship, aid and other assistance which Zane Blaisdell's heirs-at-law and next-of-kin are respectfully entitled to and any other damages as may be fair and just."

Case background

The morning of Feb. 9, Zane Blaisdell's neighbor called 911 to report a domestic disturbance at 626 Sheridan Ave., the home Blaisdell and his male partner had jointly owned since 1997. The neighbor told police Blaisdell and his partner — identified as "RK" in the suit — have had a history of domestic abuse and that the partner flicked their lights on and off as a distress code. The neighbor said he called 911 after seeing Blaisdell "throwing objects out of a second-story window onto (his) trailer and driveway, heard yelling, and saw lights flicking on and off in the home," prosecutors have said.

Blaisdell had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and schizophrenia, the suit alleges. Officers knew of his diagnoses, having been called to his house on previous occasions, the suit states.

Court records and the lawsuit concur that Blaisdell in 2010 was charged with a five-year felony of carrying a concealed weapon related to him impersonating a police officer, but his case was resolved when Blaisdell was declared not guilty by reason of insanity.

Blaisdell had not seen his physician due to winter weather conditions and was either out of his prescribed medications or not taking them, the suit states.

RK said Blaisdell "had been acting strangely, was building a 'shrine' on the dining room table, kept all of the lights on and was yelling at the neighbors," the suit states. His behavior continued to be manic through the night of Feb. 8 and early into the next morning, the suit continues.

Blaisdell began flickering his Zippo lighters around 7:30 a.m. on Feb. 9, which the suit states the neighbor mistook for RK flicking the lights on-and-off as a distress signal.

Officer Engelhart arrived first, spoke with the neighbor who had called 911, then went to Blaisdell's house and knocked on his front door for several minutes. As he was doing so, a dispatched radioed him to let him know someone else had called 911 from within Blaisdell's house requesting help and saying someone was banging at his door. The dispatcher tried telling the caller the person at the door was a police officer, but the caller hung up, the suit states.

Engelhart, Blaisdell, and RK conversed through the door, with RK stating Blaisdell wouldn't let him leave or open the door. After about 10 minutes, RK spoke with Engelhart through a closed window and said he was being held against his will, the suit states.

Engelhart radioed for backup, though no calls were placed for mental health professionals, the suit states. Sgt. Voelker and Officer Jeffers-Mercer arrived on the scene.

RK eventually opened the front door and Engelhart entered, striking Blaisdell in his shoulder with a Taser just before pulling RK out of the house to safety, the suit states. Blaisdell retreated into the house as officers instructed RK to go to a neighbor's house.

“At that moment, the emergency and/or imminent threat of harm to RK, the Defendants, and the public in general was over,” the suit states. “At that moment, there was no longer a hostage situation, or anyone being held against his will.”

About 2 minutes later, Engelhart told dispatchers he saw Blaisdell with a large kitchen knife in his hand and requested Officer Adams, a K9 handler, come to the scene with Deebo. Officer Jackson also arrived with a bean-bag shotgun.

Adams announced his presence to Blaisdell from the front porch and said he would be bitten by Deebo and that he was under arrest, the suit states. Adams made the statements as though Blaisdell would be bitten whether or not he surrendered, the suit alleges.

Adams eventually unleashed Deebo and sent him into the house, giving commands for him to bite. Deebo proceeded to knock Blaisdell onto his back and bite him, the suit states. Blaisdell stabbed Deebo in the head with a filet knife “in self-defense,” the knife remaining in the dog’s head, the suit states.

Adams entered the house and pulled Blaisdell away from the dog. Engelhart then entered and repeatedly shot Blaisdell, with Adams drawing his gun and firing as well, the suit states.

Engelhart shot Blaisdell 10 times, with Adams shooting him twice, the suit alleges.

“Instead of rendering medical assistance to Blaisdell, the only ambulance at the scene was used to transport Deebo to the veterinarian,” the suit states.

Blaisdell was pronounced deceased at the scene; Deebo made a full recovery.

“Both Defendant Engelhart and Adams used deadly force against a mentally ill man inside of his own home, where he posed no threat to himself, the officers or the general public, because he stabbed their police dog in self-defense,” the suit states.

The suit further alleges the officers named in the suit conspired to obstruct the investigation and lie about what had happened.

By killing Blaisdell, the officers violated his Fourth and Fourteenth Amendment rights, the suit alleges. The five-count suit also alleged violations of the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, assault and battery causing wrongful death, and gross negligence, willful, and wanton misconduct causing wrongful death.

The suit goes on to mention the July 2012 death of Milton Hall, a mentally ill Black homeless man shot 11 times and killed by six Saginaw police officers.

“Defendant City vowed to change its customs, policies and procedures with respect to use of force, police K9s and use of force vis-à-vis mental disturbed citizens,” the suit states.

However, little change after Hall's death, the suit alleges.

"It was only due to pressure after the death of George Floyd, renewed interest in the killing of Milton Hall, the termination of an officer for using excessive force against a female detainee, officer 'sick outs,' and a recent vote of no confidence in Defendant Ruth by the Saginaw Police Officers Association, did the Defendant City change its use of force policy including prohibiting the use of K9's to apprehend suspects," the suit states.

Engelhart and Adams were placed on administrative leave as the Michigan State Police investigated the shooting.

On Feb. 27, the Saginaw County Prosecutor's Office stated the officers were justified in killing Blaisdell.

"Considering all of the circumstances, we conclude that the officers' actions were justified and consistent with preservation of self and others," prosecutors said in the statement. "This office has thoroughly reviewed the witness statements, video and audio recordings of the incident, as well as other available evidence. We find that the officers' use of deadly force in these circumstances was justified."

Here's how prosecutors described what happened:

"The room was very small and cluttered," prosecutors said. "Officer Engelhart reported that Officer Adams yelled, 'He's got a knife,' as Blaisdell fell behind a table. Officer Adams observed that the canine had taken ahold of Blaisdell and brought him to the ground under the table. Officer Adams holstered his service firearm as Officer Engelhart pushed the table over. Officer Adams then put his hands on Blaisdell to get him off of the canine. When Blaisdell turned over, Officer Adams saw an unknown object in Blaisdell's left hand. In his right hand, Blaisdell was still holding the handle of a knife, which he had stabbed into the head of the canine."

Prosecutors said the investigation showed Engelhart reported that, at the time he fired the shots, he feared for Officer Adams' safety because he was in close proximity to Blaisdell, Blaisdell remained armed with the knife, and Blaisdell actively was resisting arrest. Adams also reported that he feared for his safety given his close proximity to Blaisdell and the fact that Blaisdell had just used the knife on the police canine, remained armed with the knife, and was attempting to get up from the ground.

Police Chief Ruth declined to comment on the lawsuit when contacted by MLive-The Saginaw News on Wednesday, Aug. 5. City Manager Tim Morales said the city does not comment on pending litigation.

The suit's next court date is pending.