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Philadelphia Officials Promise Police Reforms After Walter Wallace Jr.'s Fatal Shooting

Police commissioner says she will add behavioral health unit, equip all officers with less-lethal weapons



Police officers gathered before a citywide curfew on Wednesday in Philadelphia.

PHOTO: MARK MAKELA/GETTY IMAGES

By Scott Calvert

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Top Philadelphia officials are pledging to improve how local law-enforcement officers deal with people in mental distress after the [fatal shooting](#) of Walter Wallace Jr. by police. Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw said she would form a behavioral health unit and called for officers to have a directory that lists mental-health resources available around the clock. She said she wants to equip all 4,500 or so officers in operational roles with

Taser stun guns, which are considered less lethal. The department currently has roughly 2,300 Tasers.

Mayor Jim Kenney said the city should expand a Kensington neighborhood program in which police officers take some people who are in the throes of mental illness, addiction or both to a treatment center or respite facility, rather than to jail in handcuffs.

Police officers fatally shot Mr. Wallace on Monday in West Philadelphia. [Bystander video showed](#) him holding a knife while two police officers pointed their guns at him. Officers fired when he emerged onto a street from between parked cars and moved toward them. A police spokesman said the officers ordered the 27-year-old Black man to drop the knife before firing. Each officer fired about seven times, according to a police official; neither had a Taser, which officers can use to immobilize someone who ignores commands.

Shaka Johnson, a Wallace family attorney, said Mr. Wallace had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and was taking lithium under a doctor's care. Mr. Johnson said Mr. Wallace was in crisis when a relative called 911 asking for an ambulance, but police officers arrived first. Mr. Wallace's mother, Kathy Brant, told reporters she begged officers not to shoot her son.

The [city imposed](#) a 9 p.m. curfew on Wednesday in response to major looting on the two nights after Mr. Wallace's killing. Police made 40 arrests, mostly for looting, from late Wednesday into Thursday, city officials said, a decrease from the two prior nights. Officials also said four police officers were injured, and 11 ATMs were blown up. The curfew wasn't extended.

Hundreds of Pennsylvania National Guard members are expected to begin arriving in the city Friday, with a primary mission to safeguard property and prevent looting.

Philadelphia already has a mobile crisis line people can call for help with behavioral health problems, city officials said, and more than 3,300 Philadelphia police officers have undergone crisis-intervention training.

Ms. Outlaw said crisis training gives officers tools to slow down a situation and establish communication with people. But she said, "We may find ourselves in situations where it escalates rather quickly and we don't have the necessary time to go through all of those steps."

About a month ago, the city launched a program to better assess whether 911 dispatchers who field behavioral health-related calls should send just police, just crisis workers or both. A clinician works at the 911 center to learn more about the types of emergency calls.

“It is complex, and being able to develop the best plan requires in-the-moment knowledge of the types of calls that come in,” said Jill Bowen, the city’s acting behavioral health commissioner.

Ms. Outlaw said the clinician wasn’t on duty Monday at the time of the 911 call that resulted in Mr. Wallace’s death.

In January, the city plans to roll out teams that could respond together to behavioral health-related calls, said Kurtis August, assistant director of diversion and deflection in the city managing director’s office. He said the city is negotiating with outside providers to staff the teams.

Patrol officers who realize a situation involves someone gripped by mental distress could call on the co-response team to take over the scene, he said.

The Consortium, a nonprofit behavioral health agency in the city, has been informally giving out its phone number to Philadelphia police officers and then sending its own crisis workers out when called, said John White, its president and chief executive.

Last year, the nonprofit fielded about 1,200 calls, he said. About a quarter led to an emergency hospitalization, he said, but in most cases crisis workers were able to de-escalate tensions.

Mr. White said Mr. Wallace had been treated at the Consortium’s outpatient clinic in West Philadelphia, several blocks from where he was shot.

“He had just visited with us on Friday and got a good report. In fact, he had progressed to the point where we were ready to introduce him to our employment program, to get him ready to actively seek employment,” Mr. White said.

Ms. Outlaw said the police department suffers from not having a behavioral health unit that could develop partnerships with an array of outside providers.

“We don’t have something like that here, which is much needed,” she said, adding that she intends to change that “as soon as possible.”

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Corrections & Amplifications

Kathy Brant is the mother of Walter Wallace Jr. An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to her as Cathy Wallace. (Corrected on Oct. 29)

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