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Crisis center says it could have helped that day

“We knew him and he knew us,” said the director of the center, near the Wallace home.

By Ellie Rushing
STAFF WRITER

Just three days before Walter Wallace Jr. was fatally shot by police, the 27-year-old was treated at the West Philadelphia Consortium, a mental health crisis response center, according to executive director John White.

Wallace regularly used the outpatient center's services and had recently resumed treatment.

“His mother told me that when he came home Friday and she asked him how it went, he told her that he was doing much better and that we had gotten him ready to start looking for a job,” said White, citing privacy regulations in not specifying the type of help Wallace was receiving.

But for whatever reason, Wallace's mental health began to spiral. Police responded to his home twice on reports of a domestic disturbance Monday. It was during their third visit when Wallace walked toward officers with a knife, and they fired 14 shots at him.

Members of Wallace's family are so familiar with the West Philadelphia Consortium that they have used its services in



Walter Wallace Jr. had regularly used the outpatient center's services and recently resumed treatment. Courtesy of the Wallace family

the crisis team would still be called and would work with police to defuse the situation. White said that in 2019, the consortium's mobile crisis team responded to 1,219 emergency calls. Of those emergencies, about a quarter of the people were committed to a hospital involuntarily, and only six resulted in a person's arrest.

He also blames the fact that no formal relationship exists between the crisis units and the Police Department, something he said he has insisted be formed for months. White said the Consortium has relied on its own outreach to police, and that sometimes officers who know about its services will call the

the days after his death. If the mobile crisis team from the center — just seven blocks from Wallace's home — had been called to the scene, Wallace might be alive today, White said.

"We knew him and he knew us," said White, a detail first reported by Billy Penn.

"He trusted us and was appreciative of the help we provided," he said. "No one else on the scene could claim that credibility. ... He didn't know the police, he didn't trust them."

Police didn't summon the center during any of the calls to the Wallace home Monday, nor did Wallace's family.

When someone calls 911 to report a mental health crisis, the dispatcher is supposed to flag the call to the city's Mental Health Emergency Hotline, which then dispatches one of the city's three mobile crisis units to the scene, White said.

The West Philadelphia Consortium is one of those units and has two teams — which include a clinician, a mental health counselor, and a nurse-practitioner — that respond to calls across West Philadelphia. When the unarmed team arrives, they can offer on-site treatment, medication, outpatient services, or a ride to the hospital.

But despite three calls to the police about Wallace's conduct Monday, White's teams were never alerted.

"Do you realize how egregious this is?" said White, formerly a state representative, Pennsylvania's secretary of welfare, and a city councilman.

"[The dispatchers] should have alerted us immediately," he said. "You're telling me they had three bites at the apple?"

It's unclear why the family called 911 instead of the Consortium on Monday, but White said that if a family typically uses 911 in a crisis, it will continue to resort to that. Police Commis-

Consortium directly when responding to a mental health crisis.

Outlaw acknowledged the disconnect with existing community services and said her department can also improve the questions that 911 dispatchers ask and what they communicate to officers in the field.

"It's important to just give a full history in layperson-speak," she said at a news conference Tuesday, such as, "What's going on, if there are weapons involved, if there's a history of the involved person trying to hurt themselves or others, layout of the house."

White said his team had a two-hour phone call over the summer with city officials managing a MacArthur Foundation grant for training police in mental health first aid. They talked about modeling the Consortium's program and integrating its services in the Police Department. But when White tried to follow up with those officials, he said he never received a response.

"They have the resources: trained personnel to respond to emergency mental health situations," he said. "This is a simple change."

Some officers have been trained through the grant, White said, but not enough.

On Monday, when police responded to Wallace's home for the third time that day, his wife told police he was in a mental health crisis, said a lawyer for the family, Shaka Johnson. But the two officers immediately drew their guns.

"Lord, my baby," his mother can be heard saying on the body-camera footage that the family reviewed Thursday, according to Johnson. "Don't shoot him. Don't kill him."

Officers repeatedly told Wallace to drop the knife. He didn't, and when he slowly walked toward them, they fired and he collapsed in the middle

sioner Danielle Outlaw has vowed to release the 911 calls and body-worn camera footage of the responding officers. That is expected by the end of next week, according to a joint statement issued Thursday night by the offices of Mayor Jim Kenney and District Attorney Larry Krasner.

The Police Department does not have its own behavioral health unit, and the newly installed behavioral health expert who is supposed to be seated with 911 dispatchers was not on duty Monday, Outlaw said.

White said that when each step of the current system is followed, "it is very effective. The issue is the detail."

"There are holes in it," he said.

He said that 911 operators and police dispatchers are not trained to triage mental health crises calls. He also said that if the caller doesn't tell the operator that the person is in a mental health crisis, or if the operator doesn't ask the right questions, the crisis teams might not be looped in.

If the person in crisis has a weapon, like in Wallace's case,

of the 6100 block of Locust Street in front of his home and his mother.

"Abysmal. Nonexistent. Zero," Johnson said when asked during a Thursday news conference about the city's mental health care system and how it served the family.

"One or one thousand [calls], it doesn't matter," he said. "Because every call, they are expecting three things: professionalism, experience, and to have their issue remedied by those first responders."

White has struggled to sleep in the days since Wallace's death, his mind flooded with feelings of guilt, anger, and questions about what else he could have done.

"We were right down the lane," he said. "I am having a hard time getting around the blind eye that so many folks involved with this have turned."

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