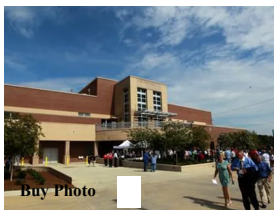


3 emergency dispatchers fired following deputy's shooting

Sean Rossman and Jennifer Portman, Published 11:22 a.m. ET Dec. 5, 2014 | Updated 9:30 a.m. ET Dec. 15, 2014



(Photo: Democrat files)

Three veteran dispatch agency workers were fired Friday morning when an internal review determined they did not follow dispatch protocol for a fire call that led to the shooting death of Leon County Deputy Chris Smith.

Tim Lee, director of the joint Consolidated Dispatch Agency, told the agency's board he terminated the employees because they failed to relay to first responders call notes put in the system just two weeks prior that Curtis Wade Holley had threatened to shoot law enforcement officers if they came to his door.

Lee said the dispatchers were trained to relay the information — which popped up as it was supposed to on the right side of their computer screens — but for reasons he could not explain, each failed to click on the alert.

"The system functioned properly. It displayed the premise hazard," Lee said. "The dispatcher, through human error, failed to click on the premise hazard."

Related link: [Sunday editorial: Leon County's 911 dispatch system is broken \(/story/news/politics/2014/12/12/leon-countys-dispatch-system-broken/20312061/\)](#)

Consequently, on the morning of Nov. 22, firefighters and Deputies Smith and Colin Wulfekuhl were sent without warning to 3722 Caracus Court for what they thought was a simple house fire. Instead, they were ambushed by Holley, 53, who investigators said harbored anti-government views and set the home ablaze to lure first responders.

Smith, a 47-year-old married father of two, was first on the scene and immediately shot and killed by Holley. Holley then turned his .40 caliber handgun on Wulfekuhl, who was saved by his bullet-proof vest as he ordered arriving firefighters to stay back. After a 12-minute gun battle in the middle of the street in the quiet neighborhood, Tallahassee Police Officer Scott Angulo shot and killed Holley.

Leon County Sheriff's Office Maj. Robert Swearingen said it's unknown whether or not Smith would have changed how he approached the call had he known about Holley's threats.

But, said Swearingen, who spoke on behalf of Leon County Sheriff Larry Campbell, the failure of dispatchers to relay the information was inexcusable.

"The Leon County Sheriff's Office is gravely concerned and deeply troubled about the CDA staff not providing available, critical officer safety information to Deputy Chris Smith and Deputy Colin Wulfekuhl and all of the first responders who were dispatched to 3722 Caracus Court," he said.

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An internal CDA review of the incident found an "officer safety" alert was entered into the dispatch system for the northwest Tallahassee home on Nov. 8 at the request of LCSO Sgt. Wiley Meggs.

"Per Sgt. Meggs with LCSO if we got a call at this residence he wants to be notified no matter what time," the alert stated. "Mr. Holley (if he is the owner of the residence) has threatened to shoot any law enforcement that comes to his residence. This is valid until told otherwise by Sgt. Meggs as of 11/8/2014 at 11:16 hours."

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LCSO officials would not disclose what caused Meggs to have the warning added, citing the ongoing investigation into the overall shooting incident.

The dispatchers fired were: Gwen Forehand, a 25-year veteran; Doyal Hester, a 20-year-employee and Darrel Newman, who had 10 years on the job. They were all fired over the phone, Lee said.

Shante Knight, a new employee undergoing training, was suspended for two weeks without pay.

Forehand, one of the three fired, told the Tallahassee Democrat that Lee was "an awesome director," but that more training is needed at the agency.

"Hindsight is 20/20, working a call is not that easy," she said. "It's easy to go back and look back and say, 'Hey this is what happened.' I just hate people had to get fired behind it."

She chose not to discuss the details of the Nov. 22 incident. The Democrat was unable to contact Newman or Hester.

Tallahassee City Commissioner Scott Maddox has been expressing concerns about the dispatch system for months.

"I think we have systemic problems at the CDA, which is why I ordered an audit prior to this horrible tragedy," Maddox said. "I am waiting for those results."

City Auditor Bert Fletcher, who is heading up the audit, said it is 75 percent complete and will include reviews of processes, training, technological issues and staffing.

Since opening last September, the dispatch center has been plagued with problems, including dozens of technological errors that led to shutdowns.

In the still-unsolved July killing of FSU law professor Dan Markel in his Betton Hills garage, first responders were initially sent to the wrong address because of a software-driven error.

Lee
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endor, to modify the system so a dispatcher could not process a call without clicking
al danger.

Moving forward, he said, such system warnings will be annually evaluated for accuracy and dispatchers will receive training that reinforces CDA procedures. The agency's quality-assurance staff will verify that premise hazards, if present, are viewed when calls come in.

"I take very seriously the actions that are being taken and that my position is to represent the community as well as the first responders," Lee said. "I think my immediate reaction to the response and the incident has shown that we take these events seriously."

Leon County Administrator Vince Long, who chairs the CDA's board of directors, said the agency has assigned officers from the different law enforcement agencies to review and analyze the dispatch center's processes.

Despite recent events, Long expressed his confidence in Lee.

"We fully support director Lee's actions," he said. "This just speaks to the fact that this function is provided by imperfect people with imperfect technology and certainly under imperfect circumstances."

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