

## August 25, 2023 – South Portland Use of Deadly Force Incident

As required by 5 M.R.S. § 200-K, the Maine Deadly Force Review Panel submits the following report of the use of deadly force incident in South Portland on August 25, 2023, involving Officer Anthony Verville of the South Portland Police Department, which resulted in the death of Christafer Dodge, age 47. By statute, after the release of the report of the Attorney General, the Panel shall examine deaths or serious injuries resulting from the use of deadly force by a law enforcement officer. The purpose of the examination is to find independently whether there was compliance with accepted and best practices under the circumstances or whether the practices require adjustment or improvement. The Panel may recommend methods of improving standards, including changes to statutes, rules, training, and policies and procedures designed to ensure best practices that prove increased public and officer safety. The Panel is not charged with undertaking a *de novo* review of the Attorney General's determination regarding the legality of the use of deadly force by law enforcement; discussions and recommendations of the Panel are independent of the Attorney General.

### Synopsis

On Friday, August 25, 2023, at 4:11 a.m., a woman called 911 from her apartment in South Portland. She whispered that her husband, Christafer Dodge, was drunk, had assaulted her, and had fired a gun in the apartment. While South Portland Officers Anthony Verville and Akos Szekely were responding, Mr. Dodge left with his AR rifle in his black Ford pickup. Officers Verville and Szekely arrived and made observations that corroborated the woman's report, e.g., a broken clothing rack, cartridge casings from a rifle on the floor, and an empty rifle case on a bed. Within minutes, Officer Szekely observed a black Ford truck drive into the parking lot. Officers Verville and Szekely ran out to the parking lot. Mr. Dodge was the driver, and as he turned into a parking space, Officer Verville saw Mr. Dodge raise a rifle and aim it in his direction. Officer Verville fired at the truck 19 times, killing Mr. Dodge.

### Information the Panel Reviewed

Before its meeting on February 27, 2025, the Panel reviewed investigative material from the Attorney General, including interview recordings, reports, forensic data, photographs, emergency communications, and videos. They also examined the Attorney General's report from February 17, 2024, and the South Portland Police Department's Incident Review Team report from January 20, 2024.

### Panel Discussion

On February 27, 2025, the Panel convened via Zoom to review the referenced incident. Several issues were discussed, including the risks of shooting firearms in a residential neighborhood, the need for appropriate follow-up services for victims, the insufficiencies of the Internal Review Team report, and the note left by the suspect. The Panel applauded Officer Akos Szekely's foresight

in monitoring the apartment building parking lot to prevent a potential ambush within the suspect's apartment.

### **Observations**

1. Mr. Dodge had a long history of alcohol and drug addiction. He attended a rehabilitation program for two to three weeks in New Hampshire in November 2022 for alcohol, cocaine, and pornography addiction. He did well for two to three months after rehab, but resumed his alcohol use. Mr. Dodge was believed to be using cocaine again, and there were concerns about his suicidal thoughts.
2. The toxicology report related to the postmortem examination was positive for cocaine. It indicated a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.229 g/100mL (approximately three times the legal limit for operating under the influence).
3. This was reportedly not the first time the suspect had assaulted his wife. Three years earlier, an incident occurred when they were both intoxicated and got into an argument at a bar, during which the suspect grabbed her by the hair, dragged her into the parking lot, and then fired a handgun several times. A criminal records check indicated that Mr. Dodge had no criminal convictions.
4. Mr. Dodge's wife observed Mr. Dodge being shot. It is unclear what follow-up services, if any, were offered to her to address the trauma she likely experienced by witnessing the use of deadly force and the death of her husband in the parking lot.
5. The post-incident investigation revealed that a bullet had penetrated an exterior wall of an adjacent residence. This bullet then went through an interior wall before ending up in the living room under a radiator. The investigation suggests (but is not entirely clear) that the resident(s) were present when the bullet entered and traveled through the residence. The State Police Crime Lab analysis concluded that this bullet was likely fired from Officer Verville's rifle.
6. The IRT report was brief and did not include a detailed discussion of the policies and procedures considered in the review. It was unclear what information was relied upon for the findings and conclusions, and no details regarding the analysis of the relevant policies or procedures were provided.

### **Recommendations**

1. As the Panel has stated previously, measures should be in place to ensure that victims of criminal behavior are offered appropriate support services to address the trauma associated with an incident. The Panel remains concerned that these victims lack adequate post-incident services. The Panel recently recommended in its 5th Annual Report that future Internal Review

Teams identify in their reports whether a referral was made for follow-up support and services for these victims..

2. Although the circumstances of this incident did not allow for the evacuation of the many residents housed at the apartment complex or nearby residences, as the Panel has observed previously, shooting with a residential building as a backdrop should be conducted with all reasonable measures and avoided whenever possible.
3. The Panel recommends that IRT reports be written comprehensively so that all facts supporting a conclusion that policies were effective are clearly stated.

### **Factual Summary**

On Friday, August 25, 2023, at 4:11 a.m., a woman called 911 from her apartment in South Portland. The apartment complex comprises residential buildings close to each other but separated by parking lots. She whispered that her husband, Christafer Dodge, who was still in the residence, was drunk, pushed her, pulled her around by her hair, and fired a gun in the apartment. She said he was “not right in the head” and “wants to die.” She also found a note written by him with a bullet next to it. She said that Mr. Dodge had been drinking, and she believed he had been using cocaine. She was crying, and the dispatcher could hear him talking to the woman, who later explained that Mr. Dodge had come into the bedroom while she was on the phone with 911 and demanded the keys to the truck. When she said no, he grabbed her by the hair again until she relinquished the keys. She said he told her, “Bring everybody...it’s over...I’m going down,” and she believed he would be aggressive with officers. While South Portland Officers Anthony Verville and Akos Szekely were responding to the call, Mr. Dodge left in his black Ford truck. Dispatch received several other 911 calls from residents as far as a half mile away reporting the sound of gunshots. The officers learned that Mr. Dodge was armed with an AR-style rifle when he left the residence. While gathering other pertinent information, Officer Verville suggested that the apartment be vacated and locked. The wife showed the officers a handgun that Mr. Dodge had left behind in the bedroom, which Officer Verville secured. While Officer Verville was in the apartment with Jennifer and a roommate, Officer Szekely watched outside in case Mr. Dodge returned.

Another South Portland police officer was driving east on Broadway, looking for the black Ford truck when it passed him traveling west towards the apartment complex. The truck turned into the parking lot and drove by the two police cruisers parked there. Officer Verville ran outside to the patio where Officer Szekely was keeping watch, and both officers ran towards the parking lot, Officer Verville ahead of Officer Szekely. Officer Verville had his patrol rifle at the low ready position, and Officer Szekely had his handgun at the low ready position. Mr. Dodge drove past them and turned into a parking space. There were several vehicles parked near them. Officer Szekely crossed in front of Officer Verville and took cover on the side of a parked vehicle, essentially putting the vehicle between him and the truck, which was the distance of six parking spaces. Officer Verville illuminated Mr. Dodge in the driver’s seat as the truck pulled into a parking spot. Officer Verville yelled, “Police!” Officer Szekely then yelled, “Stop the car! It’s the police department! Get out with your hands up! With your hands up!” Officer Verville yelled, “Get on the ground! Get on the ground!” Officer Verville observed Mr. Dodge put the truck in park, raise his rifle, turn his body in the seat, and aim the rifle in his direction. Officer Verville fired at Mr.

Dodge 19 times from approximately 48 feet away, striking Mr. Dodge and killing him. Eleven seconds had passed from the time Mr. Dodge drove by the parked cruisers to the time Officer Verville fired shots.

**Panel Members**

Fernand LaRochelle, Chair

Stephen Burlock, Esq., Assistant District Attorney (Retired), Vice Chair/Secretary

Michael Alpert, Greater Bangor Area Branch NAACP

John Chapman, Esq.

Jack Clements, Chief of Police, Saco

Sandra Slemmer, designee of Alice J. Briones, D.O., Chief Medical Examiner

Anna Love, Chief, Attorney General Investigations

Joel Merry, Sheriff, Sagadahoc County

Joshua Daley, designee of Jack Peck, Director, Maine Criminal Justice Academy

Michael Sauschuck, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety

Benjamin Strick, Vice President of Adult Behavioral Health, Spurwink

Note: The individuals who serve on the Panel are appointed to bring their professional expertise to bear on discussions of these complex cases. Thus, members of the Panel may know or have had contact with individuals involved in the case under review. In such situations, members report such affiliations to the Panel, and that information is recorded in the meeting minutes. If panel members determine that they have a conflict of interest, they are excused from voting on the panel's observations and recommendations regarding that case.