

Autopsy shows Baltimore police officer hanged himself while in jail

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2013 Cop Domestic Violence Murder Suicide James Walton Smith



Baltimore police officer James Smith hanged himself while in his cell awaiting trial in the murder of his fiancée, an autopsy concluded on Tuesday.

The office of the chief medical examiner said the cause and manner of death was suicide by hanging, said an office spokesman, Bruce Goldfarb.

Smith was found unresponsive by a corrections officer making routine rounds early Monday. He was pronounced dead at Johns Hopkins Hospital at 1:34 a.m. despite several efforts to resuscitate him, correctional officials said.

Smith, 49, had been seen "alive and standing in his cell just minutes before his suicide," said Mark Vernarelli, a Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services spokesman.

He was being held in protective custody in a single cell, jail officials said. Smith had been through standard initial screenings that looked at his emotional state, family history and other factors. He was not on suicide watch and had been evaluated by a psychologist six times since his arrest in May, Vernarelli said.

"At no time did he exhibit any signs of suicidal tendencies," Vernarelli said. "That's why he was not on suicide watch. There has been no employee negligence noted by our [correctional] detectives in their probe of the hours leading up to the discovery of his apparent suicide."

Smith, a 20-year Baltimore police veteran who had been assigned to the motorcade unit, was scheduled to be tried Aug. 30 on charges of first-degree murder and use of a firearm in a violent crime or felony, court records show.

On May 7, he was charged with killing his fiancée while off duty after police responded to his home on reports of a domestic disturbance. After shooting 37-year-old Kendra Diggs, police said, he barricaded himself in the couple's West Baltimore home until he surrendered without incident nearly six hours later.

Smith was the third inmate or detainee to commit suicide this year in a state correctional facility.

Two people committed suicide in April; the first in the Baltimore City Detention Center and the second in a pre-release unit nearby.

Smith was being housed in the Maryland Reception, Diagnostic, and Classification Center, a high-rise complex at Greenmount Avenue and East Madison Street that had recently served as an intake center for men. He had been taken out of Central Booking so he could have his own cell away from the general population because he was a police officer, corrections officials said.

Six correctional officers responded to the cell when he was found near death, and three of them worked with a nurse to revive him until paramedics showed up, Vernarelli said.

"Sadly, in this case, their efforts were not successful," he said.

Jail officials noted that suicides in state correctional custody have decreased over the past five years, going from 16 in 2007 to five in 2012.

"One life taken is too many," Vernarelli said, "but we've made great strides."

Over the past five years, state jails and prisons have improved their risk assessments and training for correctional officers, Vernarelli said. All detainees and inmates go through multiple mental health screenings, and "suicide prevention committees" at state facilities review all suicides, attempts and threats.

Defendants entering the jail undergo structured interviews to determine their suicide risk factors, and their personal, medical and family histories are questioned, a 2011 state corrections suicide prevention program manual stated. Jail medical staff also rely on observations from police, medics or jail staff before they assess an inmate or detainee's mental health.

Inmates or detainees who show lasting symptoms of being at risk for suicide can be hospitalized, and the manual describes different levels of observation, monitoring and housing. Vernarelli said detainees or inmates on suicide watch are assigned an "inmate observer," a fellow prisoner specially trained to watch them around the clock.

The internal investigative unit of the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services is investigating Smith's death, and Vernarelli said many of the circumstances of how Smith was found remain guarded until the inquiry concludes. The medical examiner's office said a full autopsy report was not available on Tuesday.

Baltimore Sun reporter Kevin Rector contributed to this article.

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