



Bereaved Parents Efforts Make Significant Policy Changes in Law Enforcement's Handling of Suicidal Persons

By Todd D. Pizitz, Ph.D., Julie and Bill Hillestad

Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death among young people ages 15-24, and is the 11th leading cause of death overall. Suicidal behavior is complex. Suicide cuts across all ages, economic, social and ethnic strata. According the American Association of Suicidology, in 2005, there were 32,637 suicides in the United States. Such figures equate to an estimated 90 suicides daily and one every 15 minutes. The surviving family members suffer the trauma of losing a loved one to suicide and can be unaware that their loved one is even contemplating such an act. The following article will highlight the events of the suicide of Grant Sattaur, and the successful efforts of his parents, Julie and Bill Hillestad to impact and change policy on how law enforcement officers handle and manage suicidal persons.

In the summer of 2008, I was contacted by the parents of Grant Sattaur, to review the 911 tapes of their son's suicide to aid in their grief process. As was told by them and chronicled in the 911 transcripts and voice tape, 20-year-old Grant ended his life on December 26, 2007 at his residence following a 3-hour negotiated standoff with the Oceanside Police Department.

Wednesday, December 26, 2007 began as a typical day for Grant in that he was scheduled to work, and opted to not go with his family on a 2-day trip to Big Bear. His parents had asked Grant to join them, but his work precluded his going along on the trip. On that morning, his parents commented that "He was chipper and in good spirits." While at work, he received a text message from his current girlfriend indicating her desires to end their lengthy relationship. Unbelievably upset, he left work during his lunch hour and proceeded to Wal-Mart to purchase a box of ammunition. Leaving Wal-Mart, he headed back to his residence, and sent his girlfriend a text message with a picture of a gun (his father's gun that was locked in a cabinet for which he had found and located keys) and a receipt for bullets purchased at Wal-Mart.

Upon receipt of Grant's text message, his girlfriend notified the police and she was informed that officers would conduct a welfare check on Grant. At 3:00pm that day, an estimated 22 police officers surrounded Grant's house with a Psychiatric Emergency Response Team (PERT) waiting in a vehicle outside. An officer with a bull horn instructed Grant to call 911 to establish communication with him. Grant complied and began speaking with a dispatcher who eventually turned the call over to a more seasoned officer.

The negotiator elicited background information and Grant's history from him. He attempted rapport building, and tried to convince Grant to surrender himself to the officers waiting outside of his home. Grant was anxious, stressed, sad, fearful and suicidal. At some point, from listening to the 911 tapes, it appears that the negotiating officer became impatient, judgmental, dominating, guilt inducing, and frustrated. The following are excerpts from the 911 transcripts.

- "Grant, shut up and listen to me. Will you do that, keep your mouth shut? You need to come out of the house so other people can go home."
- "Is that right that they can't be in their own house, because you are being stubborn and being a coward, instead of being enough of a man to come outside? Answer me. Answer me, Grant."
- "Are you going to be a coward and stay in the house or are you going to be a man and come outside and take care of your problems?"

As the negotiation carried on, there was no convincing Grant to unload or relinquish his firearm, and there was no indication from the 911 audio tape that the negotiator sought assistance of other personnel. The negotiator seemed to become more abrasive and impatient, rushing Grant, demeaning him with insults, yelling at him to shut up, and telling him to "Be a man."

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At 5:58 p.m., Grant pulled the trigger and shot himself in the chest. The police entered the home approximately eight minutes after the shot was fired and handcuffed him and then waited another eleven minutes before they would allow the Emergency Medical Technicians to tend to Grant. He was pronounced dead at 6:23 p.m. Throughout the entirety of this unfortunate and tragic ordeal, Grant's parents were dismayed and disillusioned about why they were never contacted by telephone to elicit their assistance with Grant or why the officers treated this suicidal incident as barricade/hostage situation.

Following his suicide, Grant's parents had made many inquiries into the police procedures for handling suicidal persons. Initially, their questions were met with much resistance and reluctance to discuss this matter. "We don't want to sue anyone. We want answers and for there to be policy change, so this doesn't happen to someone else," they lamented. From their inquiry, they learned that police officers have limited training on suicide calls

and that the response is generally treated as a barricaded/hostage situation. In fact, police officer negotiators undergo 40 hours of training on hostage negotiation with one day of training devoted to suicidal persons. They also learned that the PERT does not work with the negotiator and that their function is to advise officers on what facility the person should be taken to once they are safely contained. Typically, and as with Grant's case, there were no psychologists or clinicians assisting the negotiator.

Working closely with ACLU, Grant's parents endeavored effortlessly to have their story and concerns heard. They appeared on local television news spots, and several newspaper articles captured their efforts. "It is our intention to change the way suicidal persons are responded to and have PERT have more of a working relationship with the police," they explained.

Julie and Bill Hillestad have spent months and many tireless hours in their pursuit of having the necessary measures implemented to ensure more efficacious handling of suicidal persons by law enforcement officers.

The following policies and procedures have been agreed upon to be implemented to assist in managing crisis situations involving suicidal persons by the City of Oceanside.

1) Crisis Negotiation Team: The Oceanside Police Department (OPD) will change its policies and practices to provide that its crisis responders be increased from a single police negotiator to a team of responders. Other policy changes are already in practice. For example, the City of Oceanside now assigns a total of at least five officers to an incident. This team consists of three negotiators, a sergeant and a lieutenant. In addition, the PERT is also called to the event. The negotiations are to take place near the incident. There is one main negotiator. A second negotiator listens and takes notes to determine what is working and not working. A third negotiator acts in an intelligence capacity, conducting a background review of the individual in question.

2) Continuing Training: The Oceanside Police Department will change its training requirements to mandate refresher training for crisis negotiators at least every three years. All sworn OPD staff will also receive a two hour Crisis Negotiation Training.

3) Crisis Management Training: The Oceanside Police Department will change its training requirements to mandate that all lieutenants, who are the officers most likely to serve as scene commanders at a crisis negotiation, receive crisis management training.

4) Review of Incident/Recommendations for Training: The Oceanside Police Department has enlisted a commitment from FBI experts on crisis negotiation in Quantico to review the incident and negotiation transcript from Grant's suicide to advise the department on other training recommendations.

5) Additional PERT/Coverage: The Oceanside Police Department will be sending officers to the PERT Academy and will seek San Diego County or other funding for additional PERT clinicians in hopes of having a second PERT available to assist the department. An additional team will allow Oceanside to have 24-hour / 7-day-a-week coverage. ACLU has agreed to advocate with the County of San Diego and others that such funding be provided.

6) PERT Communication: The Oceanside Police Department and PERT will have PERT members discuss PERT's role and services at patrol officers' meetings to encourage the use of PERT.

7) Command Post Vehicle/ Crisis Negotiation Vehicle: The Oceanside Police Department will be getting a mobile command post unit for crisis negotiation. Some departments have a second vehicle specifically for the crisis negotiation team, which helps to eliminate background noise and distractions and can provide more space for specialized communications and research. For example, The Escondido Police Department converted an old ambulance into such a vehicle.

As a post-discussion, the negotiator involved in the Grant Sattaur suicide has retired. Julie and Bill Hillestad have written a complaint letter about this officer and the Oceanside City Attorney reported that the letter has been placed in the appropriate file.

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