

# Incident in Philadelphia (10): system failure

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Walter Wallace November 11, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the death of Walter Wallace* 

The subject's name was Walter Wallace.

Ok, in 9 posts Gadfly has tried to wrap himself around the October 26 incident in Philadelphia as a proximate point of reference with which to judge the City's proposed changes in policing talked about at the Committee of the Whole meeting October 29 and at the Budget hearing November 9.

And he has invited you to wrap yourselves around that incident in Philadelphia too.

The Wallace incident was the cause of Gadfly's frustrated **little outburst** about confronting the "first contact" situation at the Committee of the Whole meeting.

He did not feel the need to speak at the Budget meeting because Walter Wallace's name was invoked several times by both the virtual Head Tablers and the caller-commenters.

So, before we go on, join me with pulling together a bullet list of salient points about that incident.

Compare your list with mine.

What did Gadfly miss?

## What do we see?

- Police were called to the Wallace house twice before on the same day October 26.
- Phone calls to the police made clear it was a mental health problem not a crime.
- The call proximate to the event asked for an ambulance.
- There were 31 prior contacts over time with WW's house.
- WW had a long "rap sheet," but we don't know the nature of his offenses.
- WW was (or should have been) "known" to the police.
- The officers made no attempt at de-escalation.
- WW was dead within a minute of "first contact" with the officers.
- Police shoot 14 times.
- WW is killed in front of his mother, wife, family, dozens of neighbors — lots of trauma to go around.
- **Listen to WW's mother screaming over his body.**
- WW had just gotten married, his wife delivered a baby shortly after the event, he had 9 children.
- WW was carrying a 4-inch blade pocket knife.
- WW was advancing on the officers but not charging or running.
- The officers did multiple times tell WW to drop his weapon.
- The street scene was noisy and chaotic.
- It was estimated that 15 feet separated the officers from WW.
- The police were armed only with guns, they had no tasers, no non-lethal weapons.
- Police Union: WW initiated the action.
- Police Union: WW ignored numerous lawful orders to drop his weapon while advancing on the officers.
- Police Union: officers are blameless, they followed their training and police department policy.

- The officers are in their mid-20s and on the force c. 3 years — young but not unseasoned or rookies.
- Did the officers panic? Tension was high. Lots of screaming.
- The police officers look white, but their race is not specified.
- Both WW’s parents imply racism, lack of respect, unconcern for humanity.
- WW’s mother reports that an officer on one of the earlier visits that day laughed at them.
- The officers are heard saying “get him” and “shoot him” just before the shooting.
- The shooting initiates several days of harsh and ugly unrest, confrontations, and looting in the city.
- The National Guard is called in.
- Wallace’s family urges calm.
- The Mayor, Police Chief, etc., etc. know immediately on looking at the bodycams and other video that the officers screwed up.
- City officials offer no defense of the officers.
- The Police Chief offers no defense of the officers.
- The police chief is a female.
- The Police Chief did explain the nature and amount of deescalation training officers get in the Academy.
- The District Attorney engages immediately in sympathetic way with the Wallace family, fights back tears at WW’s wake.
- Philadelphia is a “Democratic” City.
- The Wallace family don’t want murder charges, blame City for officers without tasers.
- The Wallace family suggests some defunding.
- In public statements, City officials talk mainly about what they will learn from this incident.
- Quick release of the bodycam videos for the first time in such a case is touted as a sign of the City doing the right thing.
- In public statements, City officials talk mainly about new or nearly new programs to avoid such incidents in the future.

- A new program put a behavioral health specialist in the dispatch room, but that person was not there when this call came in.
- In public statements, City officials focus on their after-the-fact actions to avoid such incidents in the future.
- In public statements, the sense of City officials is that WW did not die in vain, that good will come from this tragedy.
- In public statements, the City is in an “after-the-fact” humble, penitent reform mode. A we’ve-got-to-do-better mode.
- The Police Chief is now requesting a review of the department’s training in handling mentally ill people and is exploring other models to address the problem.
- The Police Chief pledges reforms by late next year.
- The Mayor talks about healing for the city not the Wallace family.
- The Wallace lawyer — himself a former officer — says police are trained to kill.
- The Wallace family plans to sue. Past history suggests that they will receive a huge settlement.
- WW had an “existing relationship” with a mental health organization in the neighborhood that police knew or should have known about.
- That organization was not contacted that day.
- That organization had previously offered many times to formally partner with the police department on such mental health calls, but the department did not take them up on their persistent offer.
- The Twitterverse shows little if any compassion for WW.
- The Twitterverse suggests that crying “mental health” is a dodge now consciously and artfully employed to excuse individual responsibility.
- The Twitterverse blames WW for not obeying a lawful order and for being a “criminal.”
- The Twitterverse opinion is that WW got what he deserved.

What do we see here?

Gadfly feels that one thing we see is system failure, massive system failure.

Gadfly is no “abolitionist,” but he can’t help but feel a tug of truth in the suggestion by the Minneapolis abolitionist at the NCC conference that a police department structure whose only response to tragedies is a cycle of reform in catch-up mode may not be worth supporting.

But, sigh, ok, in this national climate of examining how we do public safety, what should Bethlehem’s response be?

Next.

**The Bethlehem Gadfly**