

9-year-old is pepper-sprayed on a “family trouble” call

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing February 28, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

For another example, can we not agree that just possibly a sensible re-imagining of the way public safety is done in a situation involving a child might have avoided this mess?

selections from Reis Thebault, Shayna Jacobs, and Jaclyn Peiser, “Rochester suspends police officers who pepper-sprayed a 9-year-old girl.” Washington Post, February 1, 2021.

see body cam video with this article

The city of Rochester, N.Y., has suspended the police officers involved in handcuffing and pepper-spraying a 9-year-old girl last week.

The suspensions come one day after police released disturbing body-camera footage of the Friday encounter, which shows multiple officers using force against a young girl in obvious distress while they responded to a “family trouble” call.

“What happened Friday was simply horrible, and has rightly outraged all of our community,” Mayor Lovely Warren said in a statement announcing the suspensions.

The Friday incident began about 3:20 p.m. and police who responded were told the 9-year-old girl, who hasn’t been identified, was suicidal.

The footage shows the officers chasing and restraining the girl. In one video, she’s sobbing and struggling against the cuffs as officers try to force her into a patrol car. The officers chide her and one tells her she’s “acting like a child.” She responds: “I am a child” and pleads with them to stop forcing her into the car.

Minutes later, video shows an officer pepper-spraying the girl, leaving her crying in the back seat. “Unbelievable,” says the officer who sprayed her.

It is yet another example of police treating people in the midst of mental health crises as criminals, said activists, who have questioned why officers responded to the scene and not the city’s newly minted “Person in Crisis” team.

Roj, the city spokesman, said the call originally came in as a “domestic” crime report. The girl’s mother reported her boyfriend, the girl’s father, for allegedly stealing her car, Roj said. It was only when police arrived that the mother told police her daughter was distraught and had threatened to harm herself and her mother, he added.

“It did not come in as a mental health call.”

However, he said, the officers responding to the call on Friday did have the option to call Monroe County’s Forensic Intervention Team, which dispatches mental health clinicians to crisis calls.

selections from Reis Thebault, Shayna Jacobs, and Jaclyn Peiser, “Mother of 9-year-old Rochester, N.Y. girl said police rebuffed her pleas for mental health help for her daughter.” Washington Post, February 3, 2021.

The mother of the 9-year-old Rochester, N.Y., girl who was handcuffed and pepper-sprayed by police said Wednesday that she repeatedly told an officer that her daughter was having a mental health breakdown and she pleaded with them to call a specialist instead of trying to detain her.

The officer said “no,” Elba Pope said.

Pope, 30, said the incident, which sparked nationwide outrage and prompted fresh scrutiny of how law enforcement agencies deal with people in emotional distress, has left her rattled and fearful that her daughter could suffer long-term emotional trauma.

“I was saying, ‘We need mental health out there,’ ” Pope said in an interview. “He ignored me.”

Pope spoke out one day after she and her attorneys filed a formal notice that they plan to sue the city, citing “emotional distress, assault, battery, excessive force, false arrest, false imprisonment,” as well as other potential violations of the girl’s “constitutional rights.” Pope is also calling on the city to fire the officer who pepper-sprayed her daughter.

About 20 demonstrators protested outside the Rochester Police Locust Club, which serves as the police union, on Wednesday afternoon, calling for new laws that would ban police officers from handcuffing or pepper-spraying children.

Pope said her daughter had a similar emotional breakdown in late November, which required her to be evaluated at a hospital under New York’s mental hygiene law, when she became upset over being grounded for failing to do her homework.

Pope said she could immediately tell that the girl’s distress on Friday also required an evaluation by a medical health expert.

“It just so happened she chose that moment to run out of the house, and I was like, ‘Oh, my God, here we go,’” Pope said. “I had to go get the officer and say, ‘Sir, I know my daughter, and she is about to have a mental health slowdown, can you please contact someone?’”

With the girl now about a block and a half away from home, Pope, who is pregnant, said the girl kept screaming she wanted her dad and was about “to kill me and my unborn baby and herself.”

“I said again, ‘We need mental health out here,’ ” Pope said. “He ignored me.”

Pope said the officers then demanded that Pope return to the house, leaving the officers alone with her daughter. Pope said she found out only the following day that officers subsequently used pepper spray on her daughter.

Mike Mazzeo, the president of the Rochester Police Locust Club, did not respond to requests for comment. At a news conference earlier in the week, Mazzeo defended the officers and said they told Pope to return to her house because her presence appeared to be making the girl's behavior even more unstable.

Napolitano said Pope also hopes any eventual lawsuit she files against the city also includes demands for "systematic changes" in how Rochester police deal with people who might be having an emotional or mental health episode.