
StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Beanbags, not bullets

When machetes show up on the street

More than two weeks after Abu Jeilani was shot to death by Minneapolis police, this much is plain: If many heads had been wiser, the man might have lived.

And he deserved to live, for his worst crime was mental illness — which is no crime at all. On March 10, Jeilani's delusions led him to lurch along E. Franklin Avenue with machete and crowbar in hand. Yet his machete-waving was no more inevitable than his death.

It might have been avoided if his illness had been taken more seriously. Though Jeilani recently spent three weeks in Regions Hospital and was released on psychiatric medication, no one knows whether he was taking it. If an aftercare system had been in place to assure that he was, his psychosis might have remained in check. If he'd been discharged to a residential program in the community after his hospitalization, he might have found help managing his illness. If his family's pleas for assistance had been heard by an alert mental-health system, his deepening illness might have been noticed before it turned dangerous.

But turn dangerous it did, which raises the crucial question: Did Minneapolis police really have to shoot Jeilani to bring him under control? Did they have to shoot him several times — and shoot to kill rather than to disable? After their attempt to stun him with a Taser gun failed, couldn't they have taken a step back and tried something else? After all, averting deadly outcomes during calamities like these is precisely

Mental health

Seeking a system

why the Police Department created its crisis intervention team last year. Its purpose was to prevent a recurrence of three police shootings of mentally ill people in 1999 and 2000.

Yet now a fourth mentally ill person has died from police bullets, and the death seems needless. All sorts of nonlethal equipment might have been used to stop Jeilani — from rubber nets and fire hoses to retractable batons and pepper spray. In fact, this is a case in which mere talk might have worked — yet no Somali was summoned from the crowd of onlookers to try to calm the non-English-speaking Jeilani.

The community response to such situations must improve, as even Mayor R.T. Rybak acknowledges. After a flurry of meetings, he's expressed openness to enlisting on-call mental-health professionals to help deal with troubled people who attract police attention. And just this Tuesday the Police Department announced plans to equip officers with shotguns that fire beanbags, which knock people down without killing them.

Why does it take a fourth death to spur such sensible moves? Who else will have to die before Minnesotans realize that acknowledging the suffering of mental illness isn't just a matter of decency, but of public safety?