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## SPECIAL JOURNAL REPORT

**ABOUT THIS SERIES:** In day one of this series, Carol Meredith learned of her son Michael Meredith's alcoholism, which he sought treatment for before walking away from the program and resuming drinking. • On Jan. 12, he had gone five days without drinking but also hadn't slept during that time, aggravating his longtime anxiety. Hallucinating, he called Sergeant Bluff police to his home in the early morning hours, telling an officer a woman and her ex-boyfriend had come to his house and were ransacking it. After accidentally locking himself out of his house, Michael used the police officer's phone to call Carol to pick him up. • She took him to her home, where Michael continued to talk, making little sense. Carol dozed off at around 5 a.m. and woke up a couple hours later to discover Michael was gone.

# 'SUICIDE BY POLICE'



JESSE BROTHERS, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

Michael Meredith's family members, from left, sister-in-law Theresa Meredith, brother Chris Meredith, uncle David Gill and mother Carol Meredith, talk about Michael's mental health issues and how they affected him during the days leading up to his Jan. 12 shooting death in Sergeant Bluff. Going through withdrawal from alcohol and insomnia, all while dealing with anxiety, Michael was hallucinating for hours before he was shot by a Woodbury County Sheriff's deputy after Michael attacked him with a tire iron.

## Family looks for options to get help for their relative

NICK HYTREK  
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**S**ERGEANT BLUFF — Michael Meredith left his mother's home, but didn't go far. At about 7:30 a.m., Michael's brother, Chris Meredith, who lives next door to their mother, Carol Meredith, heard his doorbell ring. At the door was Michael, asking if he could use Chris' phone to call his fiancée Lauren Lanning to bring him keys so he could get back into his house.

"He came in and used my phone, then

started telling me the same story about the girl and the guy and how they were trashing his house," Chris said.

This time, however, Michael identified the man as Jeff Winger, the name of a character from the TV show "Community."

"That's when I realized something wasn't right," Chris said.

Lanning was going to take him to the doctor, Michael said, and he needed to call in to work to say he wouldn't be coming in. After leaving a message for work, Michael hung up and went outside. Chris' wife, Theresa, left the house with their kids and found Michael in Carol's driveway, the hood on his sweatshirt pulled over his head, shading his eyes. He wouldn't come inside or make eye

contact with anyone, Carol said.

"He kept saying he was killing people with his eyes if he saw them," she said.

Lanning arrived with Michael's house key and knew he was not well. He'd stopped drinking a few days earlier, she said, and she believed his withdrawal from alcohol was causing his insomnia and leading to his hallucinations. Contrary to what Michael had said, he had no doctor's appointment scheduled for that day, Lanning said.

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**WATCH:** See Carol Meredith talk about seeking help for her son, point your smartphone camera at the QR Code and tap the link. **NEWSVU**

## Iowa Dems make pitch for early caucuses

TOM BARTON  
Journal Des Moines Bureau

Iowa Democrats made a new pitch to have the Iowa caucuses remain in the lineup of early states that kick off the presidential nominating process.

Outgoing Iowa Democratic Party Chairman Ross Wilburn sent a letter Friday to Democratic National Committee Chairman Jaime Harrison and co-chairs of the DNC's rules committee requesting it vote next month to grant Iowa a conditional waiver to be among the slate of five early nominating states after New Hampshire and Georgia failed to meet a deadline proving they have buy-in from state leaders to change the dates of their primaries.



Wilburn

The DNC's Rules and Bylaws Committee voted last month on a new calendar for its presidential nominating process. Committee members voted to grant conditional waivers to South Carolina, New Hampshire, Nevada, Georgia and Michigan to hold their presidential primaries ahead of the rest of the country, stripping Iowa of its first-in-the-nation status and moving it out of the early window entirely in favor of more diverse battleground states.

Republicans already agreed to keep Iowa's first-in-the-nation caucuses for GOP candidates — and several Republicans already have been to the state to weigh the possibility of presidential runs.

Iowa's caucuses have led the pack in presidential preference contests since 1972, drawing media attention and millions of dollars in campaigning from presidential hopefuls.

Under the proposed 2024 calendar — which still needs to be formally ratified by the full DNC early next month — South Carolina would go first, holding its primary on Feb. 3, followed by New Hampshire and Nevada on Feb. 6, Georgia on Feb. 13 and Michigan on Feb. 27.

The waivers required state party officials to submit letters to the committee by Jan. 5 showing they have buy-in from

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**THE MINI:** Did you check your Mega Millions ticket yet? —Journal Editorial Board

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*"He says if he's committed, he's going to do suicide by cop. He's not making sense."*

Carol Meredith, mother of Michael Meredith, to Officer Jory Ward, on the morning of Jan. 12.

## Suicide

From A1

### A mom's love

Lanning gave the keys to Carol, then spoke to Michael for what would be the last time before returning home to go to bed.

"I told him I loved him and everything would be OK," she said.

Carol took Michael back to his house, and Chris arrived shortly after. Inside, Michael's house was in order. No one had ransacked it like he had reported a few hours earlier.

Carol told Michael he needed help.

"I said, 'Michael, you are sick. You need to go to the hospital. Get in the car and I'll take you to the hospital,'" she said.

Michael responded ominously.

"He told me if I tried to commit him, he would commit suicide by police," Carol said. "I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'I'll do something so the police will shoot me.'"

He'd never spoken of suicide to Carol before.

But he'd mentioned it to his fiancée. Lanning said that while drinking, Michael sometimes said he felt like he couldn't go on anymore, but never mentioned anything about suicide by police.

"He was a very depressed person, but I don't think he seriously wanted to commit suicide," Lanning said.

After hearing Michael speak of suicide, Carol wasn't taking any chances.

She called the Sergeant Bluff Police Department, hoping the responding officer would realize Michael was in crisis and take him to an emergency room for an emergency hospitalization.

Under Iowa code, a law enforcement officer who believes a person is mentally ill and could harm him or herself or others can make an emergency hospitalization, taking that person into custody without a warrant and transporting him or her to a hospital for assessment.

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At 8:47 a.m., dispatch center records show, Officer Jory Ward was on his way to Michael's house and was aware Officer Travis Hutzell had been there earlier that morning.

"I am going to be making a revisit to last night's call to 201 Fifth St. Kind of a standby possibly," Ward said in a call to dispatchers.

When Ward arrived, Carol met him at the door and asked him to take Michael to the hospital to be committed.

"He says if he's committed, he's going to do suicide by cop. He's not making sense," Carol can be heard telling Ward in video footage from the officer's body camera.

"Did he say anything about harming himself?" Ward asked.

"He wants you guys to kill him," Carol said.

Michael came to the door. Appearing to know the legal requirements of an emergency hospitalization, he downplayed his family's concerns to Ward.

"They're just worried about their image," Michael said in the body camera video. "They think they have some crazy guy here that makes them look bad."

### Checking off a list

Then he ran through symptoms Ward might look for to justify an emergency hospitalization.

"I don't at all feel violent or suicidal. I'm not depressed. I'm not sad." He told Ward his family didn't understand him.

"This is all just absurd," Michael said. "There's absolutely no reason for me to be involuntarily committed."

When asked about Carol's claim he threatened to have police kill him, Michael told Ward, "She's just making shit up," and went back inside.

Ward ushered Carol and Chris around the corner of the house, where he told them it would be better if they'd take Michael to the hospital or obtain a court-ordered involuntary committal, because he probably couldn't make a convincing case to a doctor for an emergency hospitalization.

"The verbiage he just spouted is exactly what the ER docs would ask him. I'm not quite comfortable taking him there yet," Ward told them, adding he'd taken people exhibiting more extreme behavior than Michael to the emergency room, only to see them released a short time later.

"I'm afraid he's going to wander out and do something, and you guys are going to pick him up," Carol said.



PROVIDED

A family photo shows, from left, Nikki Young, Michael Meredith, Chris Meredith, Carol Meredith and Shelby Meredith at Chris Meredith's wedding. Though his anxiety made it hard for him to socialize, Michael would attend family gatherings and spoiled his nieces and nephews with gifts.



JESSE BROTHERS, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

Carol Meredith tried all day on Jan. 12 to convince her son Michael Meredith to go to a hospital for a mental health assessment, but he continually refused. Other efforts to have him committed or hospitalized were unsuccessful.

### Another possibility

Ward suggested another option, call MCAT, the Mobile Crisis Assessment Team, a team of mental health professionals employed through Siouxland Mental Health that can intervene in nonviolent situations on behalf of police to help defuse situations, assess a person in crisis and offer other solutions. Ward mistakenly told Carol MCAT was affiliated with Rosecrance Jackson Centers in Sioux City. Carol immediately dismissed it, knowing Michael had been in treatment for alcoholism there months earlier, disliked it and would never agree to meeting with someone with Rosecrance.

Carol shook her head and told Ward she'd never seen Michael act like this before. Ward said officers would return if Michael's situation changed.

"Sorry I can't give you a more definitive result," Ward said. "We'll take it minute by minute."

Citing the potential for litigation, Sergeant Bluff Police Chief Scott Pack declined to talk about his department's procedures and his officers' actions during their encounters with Michael Meredith on Jan. 12.

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As Carol and Chris stood outside in the unseasonably mild weather talking with Ward, Michael left the house without being seen. Realizing he was gone, Carol and Chris began to look for him. Chris soon received a text message from a neighbor informing him someone was playing in the snow and hanging on the fence in Chris' yard. When Chris and Carol pulled up, they found Michael having an animated conversation with himself. Chris watched for 20 minutes as his brother talked to himself — making gestures the whole time — and crawled back and forth under a fence across the street.

Michael then approached Carol. He was on a mission.

"He said, 'They finally called me and told me I have to go to Westchester, Pennsylvania, and I need to pack,'" Michael told her as she

drove him back to his house.

With no family connections in Pennsylvania, Carol believed Michael was once again hallucinating and she told him he wasn't going anywhere.

"I said, 'Michael, the only place you're going is to a hospital,'" Carol said. Michael again said he wasn't going.

Carol decided to call Michael's doctor to seek help.

### Medical options

Iowa law allows physicians to hold someone brought into an emergency room or hospital for up to 12 hours for assessment. Physicians or mental health professionals also can seek an emergency hospitalization court order to hold someone for up to 48 hours if they deem the person is a risk to themselves or others.

But those holds must be made by medical staff at a hospital, meaning that a family doctor in a clinic setting typically would be unable to request or enforce a hold.

If an individual reports feeling suicidal to his or her family doctor, the doctor could call for MCAT assistance or 911 to have police assess and transport the person to the hospital. A family doctor also could advise the patient or the patient's family to go to the hospital on their own.

Carol said she talked to Michael's doctor's nurse, who spoke with the doctor. Minutes later the nurse relayed to Carol the doctor said there was nothing she could do. The doctor's advice: either have police take Michael to the hospital or get a judge to sign an involuntary commitment order.

Michael continued to refuse to go to the hospital, and two police officers already had chosen not to take him in on an emergency hospitalization. Frustrated, and with only one option remaining, Carol called her brother and local attorney, David Gill, asking him to come talk to Michael — and bring commitment papers.

\*\*\*

Gill arrived at Michael's house

a bit past 10 a.m. Chris and Carol met him in the driveway and filled him in on Michael's odd behavior.

Michael stepped outside and sat on the stoop by the driveway, saying nothing. Gill said he told Michael he was concerned about his behavior.

"I've just had a puff of weed. I'm OK. I'm calm. I just haven't had any sleep since Friday," Michael said, adding he also hadn't had any alcohol in five days, either. (A post-mortem toxicology report confirmed the presence of marijuana in Michael's system. No alcohol was detected.)

Gill said Michael's hands were shaking and he appeared to be going through detoxification, withdrawing from alcohol. He told Michael he needed to go to a hospital where he could go through detox safely and have his mental health assessed.

"He said, 'I'm not going to go,'" telling Gill if he went to treatment again, he'd lose his job.

Gill told him that wasn't true and said he was concerned for Michael's safety if he didn't get help immediately.

"The possibility exists there's going to be catastrophic consequences for you if you're wandering around," Gill said, adding prophetically that he could be shot by a homeowner or police.

"He said, 'I just need to get some sleep,'" and went back inside, Gill said.

Gill, Chris and Carol talked briefly about what to do next. Carol decided to go home at around 11:30 a.m., feeling Michael's condition wasn't going to improve.

"I just knew he was going down a path he wasn't going to return from," she said.

Chris left for work, and Gill and Carol agreed to meet later to file for an involuntary committal from the courts.

"It was the last option," Gill said.

It was an option Lanning said she, too, was considering. She was planning to file for a committal in coming days.

"He'd gotten to a point where I couldn't help him anymore, and he wasn't going to seek it out himself," she said. "I didn't realize how bad it was until it was too late."

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Under Iowa law, a judge can issue an involuntary committal of an individual upon receiving an application, including affidavits from two people supporting it. Once a judge issues the order, it's delivered to the sheriff's office, which is responsible for locating the person, taking him or her into custody and transporting them to a hospital for assessment and treatment, if deemed necessary.

At about 2 p.m., Carol met Gill at his downtown Sioux City office, where they discussed the application process and the possible ramifications applying for a committal could have on the family's relationship with Michael, before walking across the street to the Woodbury County Courthouse. They arrived at the clerk of court's office around 3 p.m. and began filling out the application they hoped would result in a judge's order directing the sheriff's office

to pick up Michael and take him to a hospital.

They each filled out an affidavit, including details of Michael's behavior that morning to support their contention he was suffering a serious mental ailment and lacked judgment.

They hurried to complete the forms, and Gill remembers glancing at the clock in the office as they turned them in at 4:18, 12 minutes before the office closed. Gill said a clerk told them it would be reviewed by a judge the next morning, but did not say why no judges were available to review it yet that afternoon.

"Everybody recommended I get him court committed, so I did, and apparently I was 10 minutes too late," Carol said.

### A timing gap

Typically in Woodbury County, a judge designated to review commitment applications remains in the courthouse until 4:30, or later if the clerk's office notifies him or her that an application is being submitted late in the afternoon, said District Judge Patrick Tott, chief judge of the Third Judicial District, which includes Woodbury County. If the designated judge leaves early for the day, the clerk's office should be notified so any late application can be sent to another judge, who can review it yet that afternoon.

An application filed before the end of the business day should not sit overnight, and Tott said he did not know why that happened in Michael's case.

"That would by far be the exception to the rule," Tott said. "The idea is those are processed as quickly and immediately as possible."

That would not be the case for Carol and Gill, who would have to wait several more hours to get Michael help. With no other options remaining, Gill returned to his office, and Carol went home.

On her way, Carol stopped by Michael's house at about 4:45.

"I said why don't you come home and stay with me," Carol said.

Michael told her no and began talking to someone in the corner who wasn't there.

"I asked who he was talking to and he said, 'The maid. Who do you think I'm talking about? Don't you see all those green caterpillars on the ceiling?'"

Feeling there was nothing else she could do, Carol went home, making one final request of Michael that continues to haunt her.

"I said, 'Do not leave your house tonight! He wouldn't come home (with me), so I left him, and he was dead within an hour. I just keep thinking I should have made him come home, and I wish I'd done something different.'"

About an hour later, at 5:42 p.m., a 911 dispatcher at the Woodbury County Communications Center received a call about a possible burglary in process at the Woodford Mobile Home Park at 501 B St. in Sergeant Bluff, just across the street from Michael's house.

Eight minutes later, at 5:50, the communications center received urgent radio transmissions from officers at the scene.

Shots fired.

**COMING TOMORROW:** Michael Meredith's family tries to find out if he's the person shot by law enforcement officers and learns details of the shooting, which authorities later determined was justified. His family hopes speaking publicly about his situation leads to changes in how similar cases are handled by the legal and medical systems.