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SPECIAL JOURNAL REPORT

ABOUT THIS SERIES: Carol Meredith spent all day Jan. 12 trying to convince her son, Michael Meredith, to seek help. Having gone without sleep for five days and showing signs of going through withdrawal from alcohol, Michael had been hallucinating, imagining a couple breaking into his house and later telling him to travel to Pennsylvania, then seeing caterpillars crawling on his ceiling. • Michael continually refused medical treatment, telling Carol he'd commit suicide by police before allowing her to take him to the hospital. • Carol called police to Michael's Sergeant Bluff home, hoping an officer would take Michael to the emergency room for an emergency hospitalization. But after speaking with Michael, the officer didn't believe he had a convincing case for hospitalization. • Out of options, Carol and her brother, Sioux City lawyer David Gill, filed a petition for a court-ordered involuntary committal, but by the time it was filed late in the afternoon, they were told it wouldn't be reviewed until the following morning. • Stopping by Michael's house on her way home, Carol urged him to stay inside that night after he refused to go home with her. • About an hour later, police were calling emergency dispatchers to report shots had been fired in a Sergeant Bluff mobile home park.

Iowa Democrats plan to fight Republican priorities in upcoming legislative session

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DES MOINES — Iowa Democrats said they would push back against what they called the "radical ideas" of the Republican majority when the Iowa Legislature convenes for the 2023 session on Monday.

Iowa Senate Minority Leader Zach Wahls, of Coralville, and House Minority Leader Jennifer Konfrst, of Windsor Heights, laid out concerns they had about Republicans' goals in the upcoming session in a press conference on Friday. They held the press conference after the Iowa Capitol Press Association's legislative preview forum was canceled because Republican legislative leaders and Gov. Kim Reynolds declined to attend.

Wahls criticized the decision by Reynolds, House Speaker Pat Grassley, and Republican Senate Majority Leader Jack Whitver to not attend the forum.

"It is the violation of these lowercase-D democratic norms that show Iowa Republicans are in lockstep with the national Republicans in Washington," he said.

A spokesperson for Whitver said in an email the Senate leader spent time with media in interviews before the session.

"Stories previewing the upcoming session with his comments appear in multiple outlets on a daily basis," Caleb Hunter, Whitver's spokesperson said. "Democrats' hyperbole is demonstrably unfounded and wildly irresponsible."

Democrats remain in the minority in the upcoming session, having lost seats in both the House and Senate in the 2022 election, with Republicans gaining a two-thirds supermajority in the Senate.

Wahls decried the renewed push from Republican leaders for a law that would give some parents the option to use a portion of their student's per-pupil state education funding to subsidize a private school education — in the form of scholarships commonly called vouchers.

He said the plan would "defund our public schools and send public money to unaccountable private institutions."

Last year's proposal made 10,000 taxpayer-funded scholarships available to families making up to 400% of the federal poverty line or children on an Individualized Education Program. This year, Konfrst said Reynolds may propose a plan without an income cap.

"If there are no income limits on these school vouchers, which take public money and put it in private schools, that means that a millionaire family from Des Moines can send their kid to private school on the taxpayer dime, while schools in rural Iowa are crumbling because money has been taken away," she said.

Reynolds has not unveiled her proposal for a private school tuition assistance program, but she campaigned heavily on the issue in 2022 and said it would be a top issue in the new session. Reynolds and Republicans say the measure would give parents more choices in education and provide opportunities for students who don't succeed in public school.

"Over the last six years, Senate Republicans, along with the House and Governor Reynolds, have increased K-12 funding by half a billion dollars," Hunter said.

Democratic leaders also raised alarms about Republican attempts to restrict abortion, although Republicans have said they do not plan to pass laws restricting abortion until a state Supreme Court case plays out.

Reynolds has asked the Iowa

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LESS THAN 10 SECONDS



JESSE BROTHERS, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL FILE

Law enforcement officers gather at the scene of an officer-involved shooting at Woodford Mobile Home Park, 501 B St., in Sergeant Bluff on Jan. 12. Michael Meredith was fatally shot after striking a Woodbury County Sheriff's deputy with a tire iron.

What happened when Michael Meredith died

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SERGEANT BLUFF — Carol Meredith had left her TV off the night of Jan. 12.

Her brother, David Gill, was working at his law office in downtown Sioux City when he saw a breaking news notification about a man being shot by police in Sergeant Bluff.

There were no other details, but Gill's mind immediately filled with dread. Just a few hours earlier, he'd been in Sergeant Bluff trying to convince his nephew Michael Meredith, Carol's son, to seek a mental health assessment after having hallucinations that had already led to two police calls to his home. He and Carol had even filed a court petition late that afternoon to have Michael involuntarily committed, but it wouldn't be reviewed by a judge until the following day.

Knowing Michael had been threatening to do something that would force police to kill him — commit suicide by police — Gill thought immediately of Michael when he saw news of the shooting. "I knew it was him," Gill said.

Checking it out

Concerned, he drove to Sergeant Bluff to check on Michael and, approaching from Interstate 29, saw the flashing emergency lights of police and emergency vehicles in Michael's neighborhood. He pulled into Michael's driveway and could see lights on inside the house. About to knock on the back door, Gill was approached by an officer, who told him he couldn't enter. When Gill asked why, the officer said he couldn't tell him.

Gill explained he needed to check on his nephew, to see if he might be involved in the situation that was attracting all the police attention across the street. The



TIM HYNDY, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL FILE

Police tape hangs between two units at Woodford Mobile Home Park in Sergeant Bluff on Jan. 13, the morning after Michael Meredith was fatally shot by a Woodbury County Sheriff's deputy.

officer wouldn't tell him more.

Frustrated, Gill drove to Carol's house, told her about the news he'd heard and his encounter with police at Michael's house.

The two, along with Michael's brother Chris, went back to Michael's house. Again, a police officer told them they couldn't go inside despite their insistence they needed to check if Michael was safe.

"By then, the three of us came to the conclusion we knew what we were going to hear," Gill said.

They returned to Carol's home, then decided to go to the hospitals to see if they could find Michael. They first went to the MercyOne Siouxland Medical Center emergency room.

"I asked, 'Is Michael Meredith there?' and (a nurse) told me, 'you'll have to talk to police,'" Chris said.

Carol jumped in. "I said, 'I'm his mother. I need to know if he's dead or alive.' She told me we'd have to talk to the police about it."

They went back to Carol's home. Gill received a text message from his wife,

informing him of a news report that the person who had been shot in Sergeant Bluff had died.

"Shortly after I got the text, two state troopers appeared at the door," Gill said. Michael had been shot, one of them told the family, and had died at the hospital.

Then came a visit from Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation special agent Lynn Olesen, who interviewed the family and discussed the early stages of the investigation into the shooting with them.

Getting the details

The family was told that, minutes before the call from the mobile home resident was made, Michael had broken into a car nearby and sat in it, apparently waiting for someone to call police. When no officers came, he attempted to break into the mobile home, prompting the call that led to his fatal confrontation with officers.

Please see **MEREDITH**, Page A4



SEE: For footage from the scene, point your smartphone at the QR Code and tap the link. (CONTAINS GRAPHIC CONTENT) **NEWSVU**



WATCH: To see family members talk about applying for court orders, point your smartphone camera at the QR Code and tap the link. **NEWSVU**

THE MINI: The Iowa Legislature begins the 2023 session Monday, hopefully less chaotic than in recent days in the U.S. House of Representatives. —**Journal Editorial Board**

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"How can court officials make sure cases don't fall through the cracks like Michael's did? This is an example of a case that failed."

David Gill, on the death of his nephew, Michael Meredith, in a police shooting

Meredith

From A1

Carol shared with Olesen all the events — Michael's strange behavior, his lack of sleep, his talk of suicide by police — that had happened earlier in the day. She said investigators realized the incident wasn't some random burglary interrupted by police. A DCI official said the investigation into Michael's death is completed and the agency had no further comment on it. The agency's final report is not a public document and will not be released, a lawyer for the Iowa Department of Public Safety said.

"I knew that night they realized it was a suicide," Carol said. "He just went out so they'd kill him."

The next day, at 1:46 p.m., Gill received a call from the clerk of court's office to confirm that a judge had approved his and Carol's petition for an involuntary committal for Michael earlier that morning.

After more than a month of reviewing the shooting, then-Woodbury County Attorney Patrick Jennings announced he had determined the shooting of Michael was justified. At the conclusion of Jennings' press conference, Woodbury County Sheriff Chad Sheehan released video, recorded by the deputies' body cameras, of the shooting.

The first person dispatched to the mobile home park was Sergeant Bluff police officer Jereme Muller. A resident had called 911 to report that a white male was attempting to break into his house and his car.

Muller arrived at 5:47 p.m. Woodbury County Sheriff's deputies Devin Groenhagen and Eric Fay, in the area for a training exercise, also responded and arrived just after Muller.

As the three walked toward Lot 5 in the early evening darkness, the area illuminated by street lights and their flashlights, the officers heard shouts from a female and male saying, "you're on my porch." Groenhagen, followed by Fay, ran to the trailer, approaching between a parked car and a neighboring trailer.



TIM HYNDS, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

Members of Michael Meredith's family listen as Woodbury County Sheriff Chad Sheehan and then-Woodbury County Attorney Patrick Jennings talk during a Feb. 23 press conference in which Jennings announced his determination that a sheriff's deputy's fatal shooting of Meredith was justified. Meredith was shot Jan. 12 after he rushed two deputies and a Sergeant Bluff police officer and struck one of the deputies with a tire iron.

Muller followed and approached from the driveway.

Body cam video showed the deputies walk up to the trailer, and Michael immediately rush out at them, a four-way tire iron in his right hand. Groenhagen backed up while Fay could be heard shouting "show us your hands" three times before Michael hit Fay in his left forearm with the tire iron. Fay then fired two shots as Groenhagen discharged his Taser.

The entire encounter lasted less than 10 seconds.

"It was not until Deputy Fay felt that his life was in danger that he discharged his firearm," Jennings said during the press conference. "It was reasonable, under the circumstances known to Deputy Fay, for him to fear for his safety."

One of the two shots fired by Fay entered Michael's chest on the right side and traveled to the left, puncturing his heart and coming to rest near his left armpit.

Michael could not be heard saying a word during the encounter and never spoke after being shot. Fay, with a vehicle behind him and unable to retreat from Michael's

rapid advance, was forced to make a split-second decision.

Drawing conclusions

"In this case, unfortunately, the ending that happened was out of our control," Sheehan said when releasing the video. "The incident wasn't going to end any other way."

Michael's obituary appeared in the Journal four days after his death. The first line read: "Michael S. Meredith, 35, of Sergeant Bluff, died Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, from suicide after suffering many years with alcoholism."

Carol wrote those words purposely to let the world know her son wasn't a criminal, some strung-out drug user who was shot while attacking cops, as people assumed in comments posted at the end of online media stories about the shooting.

He was a troubled man dealing with addiction and mental illness.

"I felt he was being portrayed as someone who went over to burglarize a trailer court," she said.

"This is not some criminal activity. It was the result of some mental health crisis."

A different man

His fiancée, Lauren Lanning, does not believe Michael intended to commit suicide that night. He was out of his mind and not living in reality, she said, a condition caused by the combination of insomnia and alcohol withdrawal that led to his hallucinations.

"Coming at somebody with a tire iron, that definitely was not him," she said. "I don't think he would have done what he did that night without all those factors. That wasn't him."

Based on Michael's comments to her hours before his death, Carol firmly believes his death was a suicide and could have been prevented. Michael needed help, and Carol tried every means possible that day to get it for him. Instead, she found perceived weaknesses in the protocols set up to help people like her son.

"There should be a clear process what happens," Carol said. "I know who to call. Think about the people

who don't know what to do."

Rather than quietly mourn, Michael's family chose to speak publicly about his issues and call for more responsiveness to people experiencing a mental health crisis.

"How can court officials make sure cases don't fall through the cracks like Michael's did? This is an example of a case that failed," Gill said. "There were some deficits that occurred in the assistance we sought that day. We'd like people in institutions and agencies to think about whether there are better ways to handle these situations."

No one will ever know what was going on inside Michael's mind during his final hours and whether he wanted his life to end. Regardless of his intentions that night, Michael forced officers to make a life-or-death decision.

His family hopes for changes making it easier for people like Michael who are experiencing a mental health crisis to end up in a hospital rather than a morgue, so another officer isn't forced to be an involuntary participant in another person's suicidal plan.

Timing can mean everything when seeking involuntary commitments

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SIOUX CITY — Michael Meredith's family continues to struggle with the hypothetical question of what might have happened had they taken action to have him involuntarily committed to a hospital earlier in the day.

If his mother, Carol Meredith, and uncle David Gill had gone to the Woodbury County Court-house at 2 p.m., would he still be alive? By filing for a committal an hour earlier on Jan. 12, a day Michael was hallucinating and threatening to commit suicide by police, would a judge's order have been issued yet that afternoon, early enough for a sheriff's deputy to go to Michael's house and pick him up before he left on his suicide mission?

"I still think about that," Gill said.

Instead, Gill and Meredith went to the clerk of court's office at 3 p.m. and filled out the paperwork for an involuntary committal, turning it in 10-15 minutes before the office closed at 4:30. They were told a judge would review it the following morning. Gill said he doesn't remember the clerk telling them why it wouldn't be reviewed yet that afternoon.

Less than two hours later, Michael was dead, shot by a Woodbury County Sheriff's deputy after rushing at him and striking him with a tire iron.

Gill and Meredith found out first hand a shortcoming of the involuntary commitment procedure: It's an option available only during business hours.

If a person having a mental health crisis refuses to voluntarily go to a hospital and a police officer called to intervene doesn't take action to make an emergency hospitalization, the only option left often is a court-ordered involuntary committal, which requires an application by two people to be filed in the clerk of court office, then a judge's review and order.

Finding gaps

In Woodbury County, once it's approved and processed, a clerk walks across the street to deliver the order to the sheriff's office,

where it's processed and given to an officer in the transport division or a deputy, who will then seek the individual to take him or her to a hospital.

If that application is made late in the afternoon, as was the case with Michael Meredith, there are no guarantees the order will be processed and/or acted upon yet that day, some who deal with commitments on a regular basis say.

"It's really with the latecomers that there's the gaps," said Brian Vakulskas, a Sioux City lawyer with experience with the committal process. "I've tried to get a judge at 4:25 and not been able to find one."

That shouldn't be the case, said District Judge Patrick Tott, chief judge of the Third Judicial District, which includes Woodbury County.



Tott

One judge on a rotating basis is designated to review all commitment applications, which are to take priority over other court filings, Tott said. If that judge leaves early for the day, he or she typically alerts the clerk's office so if an application is filed, it can be sent to another judge. If a judge is still reviewing an application after 4:30, someone in the clerk's office will remain to process the judge's order.

An application filed before the end of the business day at 4:30 should not sit overnight because no judge was available to review it.

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

Had Carol Meredith's request for her son's committal been reviewed yet that day, Tott wondered whether it would have been processed by the sheriff's office, which by law is required to receive commitment orders. That office, too, is closed by 4:30, and Tott said it can be hard to reach someone if a committal order is issued after office hours.

"I know the topic has come up

on a couple occasions. I know they're aware of the fact we'd like to have someone get them regardless of the time," Tott said.

Availability

Woodbury County Sheriff Chad Sheehan said someone in his office is always available to receive commitment orders.



Sheehan

Deputies and jail officers are on duty at any given time, and the clerk's office knows how to contact them if a committal order is signed after business hours. Orders have been delivered to the jail as late as 6 p.m., he said.

"We take the orders when they're brought over. If it's after hours, we take them," Sheehan said. "Our office might be closed at 4:15, but we have deputies and jailers 24/7. We're reachable 24/7."

Sheriff's Sgt. Blake Stahlecker, who oversees the four-person transport division tasked with seeking people who are subject of committal orders in addition to driving jail inmates to and from court appearances and transporting inmates to prison, said it's rare that an order comes in after 4:30, and the clerk's office typically notifies him when one is coming after the office is closed.

"They'll usually give me a heads up if they're processing something late," Stahlecker said. "We don't know about an order until we get it."

If received after hours, when transport officers have left for the day, Sheehan said committal orders are given to a deputy to search for the individual, though deputies may be dispatched on other calls at the time and might not always be immediately available to seek the person who's the subject of the committal order.

"It is a priority, but it depends on the totality of the circumstances of the day," Sheehan said. "We work as fast as we can."

Options for emergency help

An involuntary committal is often a family's last resort to get emergency mental health treat-

ment for a loved one refusing to seek help, and most people in need of assistance get it through other avenues before a family must take that step.

Most individuals who receive emergency mental health care come to the emergency room voluntarily, be it by private vehicle, an ambulance or with police, said Kristin Yaneff, a behavioral health social worker at UnityPoint — St. Luke's in Sioux City.

Yaneff

In Iowa, four hospitalization options exist when seeking treatment for someone who's experiencing a mental health crisis: a voluntary admission to the hospital or a mental health facility, a 12-hour hold, a 48-hour emergency hospitalization or involuntary court committal.

When a person comes to the hospital voluntarily, he or she can leave at any time. Sometimes they just need medications or to be set up with outpatient services, Yaneff said, but doctors can observe them and admit them to the hospital if they're acutely psychotic, suicidal, manic or a risk to themselves or others.

"Just because a person has a mental illness, it's not illegal and it doesn't mean they're unsafe. There's a very fine line," Yaneff said. "We typically do err on the side of caution."

Law enforcement officers also may take a person in crisis for an emergency hospitalization. Iowa law says any peace officer who reasonably believes a person is mentally ill and poses a threat to him or herself or others can take that person into custody without a warrant and transport them to a hospital or mental health facility.

State law allows doctors to hold the patient at the hospital for 12 hours. If doctors believe the person needs extended care but he or she doesn't want to stay at the hospital, they can seek a 48-hour hold from a judge. If it's after 4:30, doctors in Woodbury County contact a judge or magistrate who is on call to request such a hold,

which goes into effect once the judge gives verbal approval.

Exercising rights

After 48 hours, the hold expires. The hospital can't hold a person against his or her will, but they can stay voluntarily, and many do, Yaneff said. If they insist on leaving, a doctor will discharge them against medical advice.

"Mentally ill people still have rights," Yaneff said. "Even if experiencing a mental health crisis, as an adult you have the right to make care decisions."

If the medical staff believes the person should stay beyond 48 hours but doesn't want to, they might encourage the person's family to seek an involuntary court-ordered committal, the same kind of committal Michael Meredith's family sought.

"It's very easy to get someone committed (in Iowa)," Vakulskas said.

But a drawback to the involuntary committal process is that applications can be made only during business hours at the courthouse. If a person is having a crisis at night or on the weekend, the only option is to have the person go to the hospital voluntarily or call 911 and seek an emergency hospitalization from police, who can seek assistance from the Mobile Crisis Assessment Team, a group of mental health professionals on call around the clock to assist law enforcement officers encountering someone experiencing a mental health crisis. Calling the Sioux Rivers Crisis Center is another option.

"Some things are easier said than done," Tott said. "There are options, they're just not ideal."

Ideally, he said, the court system would be able to accommodate after-hours applications for involuntary commitments, but to do so would mean extended office hours, requiring either the hiring of additional personnel or overtime pay for existing staff. That's currently not feasible, Tott said, under the judicial system's budget as approved by the Legislature.

"We try to do everything within our power and resources," he said.