

**Fatal Officer Involved Shooting of Stephanie Browne
Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department**

**Deputy Michael Thompson, #625460
Deputy Luis Valle, #651213**

J.S.I.D. File #22-0058



GEORGE GASCÓN

District Attorney

Justice System Integrity Division

November 26, 2024

MEMORANDUM

TO: ACTING CAPTAIN ARTURO R. SPENCER
Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department
Homicide Bureau
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Monterey Park, California 91755

FROM: JUSTICE SYSTEM INTEGRITY DIVISION
Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office

SUBJECT: Fatal Officer Involved Shooting of Stephanie Browne
J.S.I.D. File #22-0058
L.A.S.D. File #022-02322-0685-013

DATE: November 26, 2024

The Justice System Integrity Division of the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office has completed its review of the February 15, 2022, fatal shooting of Stephanie Browne by Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) Deputies Michael Thompson and Luis Valle. We have determined that insufficient evidence exists to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Thompson and Valle did not act in lawful self-defense when they each fired their duty weapon.

The District Attorney's Command Center was notified of this shooting on February 15, 2022, at approximately 10:15 p.m. The District Attorney Response Team responded to the scene and was given a briefing and walk-through by Lieutenant Vincent Ursini of LASD.

The following analysis is based on reports and other materials, including recorded interviews, photographs, video recordings, and radio communications submitted to this office by LASD Homicide Bureau on January 5, 2023. Thompson and Valle provided investigators with voluntary statements which were considered in this analysis.

FACTUAL ANALYSIS

On February 15, 2022, at approximately 5:45 p.m., LASD Santa Clarita Station Deputies Thompson and Valle responded to a residence in Lancaster for a 9-1-1 call of a woman threatening to kill herself with a knife.¹ Upon arrival, deputies entered the residence and observed Stephanie Browne seated in a chair at the kitchen table, holding a knife to her throat.

Thompson and Valle ordered Brown to drop the knife. Browne did not comply. While still holding the knife to her throat, Browne quickly moved towards the deputies. In response, Thompson and Valle fired their service weapons, striking Browne and causing her to fall to the

¹ The 911 call was made by Browne's aunt, later identified as [REDACTED]. This call, along with all other conversations referenced in this memorandum, was recorded.

floor.² Browne was pronounced dead at the scene by Los Angeles County Fire Department (LAFD) personnel at 6:21p.m.

On February 18, 2022, an autopsy of Browne was conducted by Deputy Medical Examiner Richard Ou, who determined the cause of death to be multiple gunshot wounds.³



Browne's knife was photographed on the kitchen table.

Statement of [REDACTED]

On February 16, 2022, LASD Sergeant Anthony Delia and Detective Teri Bernstein interviewed [REDACTED], ([REDACTED]). [REDACTED] stated that Browne was her niece. [REDACTED] lived at the residence with her brother-in-law, [REDACTED], ([REDACTED]), and her daughter, [REDACTED]. She explained that Browne used to live in a trailer but she “caught her bed on fire and burned it down.” Browne was then placed in a mental health facility but later walked out. [REDACTED] said that Browne was currently living inside a tent with her friends somewhere in Lancaster.

[REDACTED] stated that on the date of the shooting, Browne came to the residence looking for food and cigarettes. [REDACTED] tried to take Browne to the store, but she refused to go. [REDACTED] said that Browne

² A total of 11 rounds were fired.

³ Toxicology did not indicate the presence of any drugs or alcohol.

was acting “edgy” so she ([REDACTED] went to her bedroom to get away. A few moments later, she heard Browne yelling at [REDACTED] and called 9-1-1 in fear for [REDACTED]’s safety. [REDACTED] said that Browne had a history of attacking [REDACTED].

[REDACTED] saw Browne seated at the kitchen table as she exited the residence to meet the deputies. Moments later, [REDACTED] walked outside and told her that Browne had a “knife and threatened to kill herself.” [REDACTED] sat inside [REDACTED]’s truck, which was parked out front. The window of the truck was down, and she could hear part of the conversation between the deputies and Browne. She said she heard the deputies “try to reason” with Browne, but Browne was yelling back and saying things that “did not make sense.” She stated she heard gunshots but did not see anything else.

[REDACTED] said she believed Browne committed “suicide by cop.” She explained that Browne has had mental health issues since the age of 16. Browne was prescribed the drug Seroquel, and when taking it she would act normal.⁴ However, Browne had not taken the medication in two to three years. [REDACTED] said that Browne “used to fight law enforcement” when she would encounter them.

Statement of [REDACTED].

On February 16, 2022, Delia and Bernstein interviewed [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] said that he resided at the home with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and that Browne was his stepdaughter. He explained that Browne has had mental health issues since she was approximately 18 years old and that he used to take her to mental health doctor appointments. Recently, Browne stopped going to these appointments and had not been taking her medication. Since going off the medication, Browne became more “belligerent.” [REDACTED] said that Browne has had numerous contacts with law enforcement due to her mental health issues. He stated that she would “kick at the deputies” when they tried to take her to the hospital.

On the date of the shooting, Browne arrived between 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. asking for food and cigarettes. [REDACTED] offered to take Browne to the store, but she would not go. Browne sat at the dining table talking, but “nothing made sense.” Browne then pulled a knife out of her pocket and made a swiping motion towards her neck. She also made a stabbing motion towards herself.

[REDACTED] stated that when the deputies arrived, he told them that Browne had a knife. He then went into his truck and could hear Browne screaming. He heard gunshots but did not witness the shooting.

Statement of [REDACTED].

On February 16, 2022, Delia and Bernstein interviewed [REDACTED]. She explained that she lived in the home with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] said she did not feel safe when Browne was around. On the day of the shooting, Browne arrived before 4:00 p.m. She heard Browne making threats to “bleed herself.” [REDACTED] remained in her bedroom until the deputies arrived. After, she went inside [REDACTED]’s truck and could hear the deputies attempt to calm Browne down. [REDACTED]

⁴ Seroquel is an antipsychotic medication used to treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

said she heard Browne scream and it sounded like she was “charging.” She then heard several “rounds” but was unable to tell if it was gunshots.

Statement of Deputy Valle

On March 4, 2022, Delia and Bernstein interviewed Valle. Valle stated that on the day of the shooting, he and Thompson were working as a two-man patrol unit based out of the LASD Santa Clarita Station. They were dispatched to a “priority mentally ill/family disturbance” call around 6:00 pm to the residence. Upon arrival, he and Thompson contacted [REDACTED], who directed them inside.⁵

Once inside, Valle saw Browne seated at the dining room table. He approached her at a distance of one to two feet. Thompson pointed his flashlight at Browne and he (Valle) could see the handle of a knife. He could not see how long the blade was. Valle said that he initially felt like he was there to help, but he became worried once he saw the knife. Thompson said, “Let’s get some distance.”

Valle backed up while repeatedly telling Browne to “calm down.” He explained that Browne was saying things that did not make sense. He said Browne made a comment about “cutting a jugular.” Valle stated that Browne kept telling him to leave and he believed she was going to “attack” them.

Valle stated that Browne stood up and approached him and Thompson with a knife in her left hand, while her right hand was moving towards them. He said he was scared for himself and his partner. Valle stated that Browne was close enough to stab him. As Browne got closer to Thompson, Valle fired three to four rounds at her until she stopped moving

Valle said that he believed a TASER would not have been effective because Browne was wearing baggy clothing. He also said the thought he “might miss” the target when firing because the residence was so cluttered. He felt that he had to shoot because if they went “hands on” with Browne, it would not have taken long for her to move the knife from her neck and stab them.

After the shooting, Valle handcuffed Browne and recovered the knife underneath her body. He and Thompson began to provide medical aid.

Statement of Deputy Thompson

On March 4, 2022, Delia and Bernstein interviewed Thompson. Thompson stated that he and Valle responded to a “call for service” which indicated someone was bleeding. Thompson coordinated the response with the LASD Mental Evaluation Team (MET).⁶ MET indicated they would take one hour to arrive at the residence.⁷

⁵ Neither Valle nor Thompson had any prior contact with Browne.

⁶ According to LASD, “MET delivers 24/7 real-time crisis de-escalation, negotiation, and mental health advocacy during emergencies.”

⁷ Officers did not wait for MET to arrive due to concern for Browne’s welfare.

Upon arrival, Thompson met with [REDACTED] who told him Browne needed to be placed on a “5150” hold and was “suicidal.”⁸ When Thompson went to the front door, he saw Browne sitting at the dining room table with her left hand, “Balled up and resting against her jaw area in a thinking stature.” Browne’s right hand was on top of the table.

Thompson said the residence was dark and he used his flashlight to illuminate Browne. He could see something poking out of her fist and realized it was the handle of a knife. He unholstered his gun and told Valle that Browne had a knife. He requested a medical response over his radio in case Browne tried to hurt herself.

Thompson stated that Browne’s demeanor and statements caused him to fear that she would become “homicidal.” Browne was waving her right hand around and said something about cutting a jugular. She continued to say things that “were way out in left field.” Thompson believed that if he used a TASER on Browne it would be ineffective because she was wearing baggy clothing. He also feared the TASER might agitate Browne into attacking both himself and Valle. He told Valle, “Let’s take a couple steps back.” He was worried that if he stepped back further, he and Valle would trip because the residence was so cluttered.

Thompson heard Valle give Browne multiple commands to, “Put the knife down!” However, Browne stood up with the knife to her neck and advanced towards them. Thompson said that Browne, “Looked like she was going to kill one of us.”

Thompson said he and Valle both commanded Browne to get down as she advanced. She did not comply. Thompson said Browne got so close, he feared she would take the knife from her neck and use it on them. Thompson fired approximately three to four rounds towards Browne’s upper torso causing her to fall back. He said that he felt he had no other option because she was so close.

Body Worn Video (BWV)

During the incident, Thompson and Valle wore BWV devices. Both videos depict the approximately eight-minute-long encounter between the deputies and Browne. Deputies enter the residence with Browne seated at the kitchen table holding a knife to her throat. The residence appears both dark and cluttered. Valle attempts to speak with Browne while Thompson shines a light on her. Browne responds to Valle both fast and unintelligibly. At one point she says she has a “knife to her vein.” Valle repeats, “What’s your name? I’m gonna help you,” multiple times, but Browne does not respond. Valle tells Browne, “Put the knife down. Put the knife down.” Browne does not comply and yells, “Leave, you’re ignorant.”

Browne waves her right arm, stands up and quickly walks towards the deputies while holding the knife to her throat. Valle yells, “No! No! No! Down! Down! Down!” Browne continues to advance swiftly. Once Browne is within two to three feet of Valle, he opens fire. Thompson also fires and Browne falls to the floor.

⁸ “5150” refers to the section of the Welfare and Institutions Code which allows an adult who is experiencing a mental health crisis to be involuntarily detained.



A still image from Thompson's BWV depicting Browne (center), and Valle (left). Browne can be observed seated and holding a knife to her throat.



A still image from Thompson's BWV depicting Browne (center) holding a knife to her throat and advancing towards the deputies.



A still image from Valle's BWV moments before firing at Browne (center).

LEGAL ANALYSIS

A peace officer is justified in using deadly force upon another person only when the officer reasonably believes, based on the totality of the circumstances, that such force is necessary to defend against an imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury to the officer or to another person, or to apprehend a fleeing person for any felony that threatened or resulted in death or serious bodily injury, if the officer reasonably believes that the person will cause death or serious bodily injury to another unless immediately apprehended. Penal Code § 835a(b), (c)(1)(A), and (c)(1)(B).

A threat of death or serious bodily injury is imminent when, based on the totality of the circumstances, a reasonable officer in the same situation would believe that a person has the present ability, opportunity, and apparent intent to immediately cause death or serious bodily injury to the peace officer or another person. An imminent harm is not merely a fear of future harm, no matter how great the fear and no matter how great the likelihood of the harm, but is one that, from appearances, must be instantly confronted and addressed. Penal Code § 835a(e)(2).

“Totality of circumstances” means all facts known to or perceived by the peace officer at the time, including the conduct of the officer and the subject leading up to the use of deadly force. The peace officer’s decision to use force is not evaluated with the benefit of hindsight and shall account for occasions when officers may be forced to make quick judgments about using force. Penal Code § 835a(a)(4) and (e)(3).

To prove Thompson and Valle committed an unlawful homicide by firing their service weapons, the People must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that based on the evidence, they could not reasonably believe that the use of deadly force was necessary to defend against a threat of death or great bodily injury to themselves or others. If Thompson and Valle reasonably believed that deadly force was necessary when they fired their weapons, then insufficient evidence exists to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that they did not act in self-defense. Both deputies provided statements in this matter. Thus, the analysis relies on their statements, family members' statements and BWV.

By the time Thompson and Valle entered the home, Browne was both agitated and incoherent. For eight minutes, the deputies attempted to deescalate the situation to no avail. Without warning, Browne got up and rapidly approached them with a knife to her throat. Thompson and Valle felt that they had no other choice but to fire.

While Browne did not point the knife at the deputies, her actions may have reasonably caused them to believe she was going to stab them. The BWV depicts Browne quickly advancing with a knife while swinging her right arm. The deputies gave Browne numerous commands to stop and not approach them further. Browne continued to advance on the deputies despite these commands and their efforts to safely retreat. Only when Browne was within one to two feet did the deputies open fire.

Karen, John, and Catherine all provided consistent descriptions of Browne as unstable and potentially violent on the date in question. Furthermore, they each described past instances of Browne's dangerous behavior. This evidence may very well come to light at trial pursuant to Evidence Code § 1103(a)(1) which states that, "Evidence of the character or a trait of character of the victim of the crime for which the defendant is being prosecuted is not made inadmissible if the evidence is offered by the defendant to prove conduct of the victim in conformity with the character or trait of character."

Thompson stated that he felt he had no other option but to fire at Browne because of her proximity and the physical characteristics of the residence. Valle indicated that a TASER would have been ineffective because Browne was wearing baggy clothing. Valle said that he had to shoot because if they went "hands on" with Browne, she could have stabbed them. Such evidence will likely rebut the argument that the officers did not act in lawful self-defense but, in fact, reasonably believed that the use of force was necessary under the circumstances.

Because one reasonable interpretation of the evidence leads to the conclusion that Thompson and Valle reasonably believed that the use of deadly force was necessary, insufficient evidence exists to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that they did not act in lawful self-defense when they shot Browne.

CONCLUSION

Insufficient evidence exists to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Thompson and Valle were not acting in lawful self-defense when they shot Browne.