

Family plans to sue over deputies' killing of mother

Sheriff's Department says Niani Finlayson threatened to stab estranged boyfriend.

BY KERI BLAKINGER

The family of a Black woman shot and killed in front of her 9-year-old daughter this month by a Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy has filed a claim signaling they plan to sue the county and the Sheriff's Department for \$30 million.

The potential lawsuit stems from an incident the evening of Dec. 4, when deputies responded to a domestic violence call in Lancaster. The Sheriff's Department said Niani Finlayson, 27, had a knife and was threatening to stab her estranged boyfriend when deputies arrived, but attorney Bradley Gage, who is representing the slain woman's family, disputed that during a news conference Thursday morning.

"Niani was sitting on the ground when she was shot in the back," Gage told reporters. "She was not engaging in any type of physically threatening behavior at all. In fact, she was the victim."

The Sheriff's Department has not yet made public body camera footage of the shooting, which Gage demanded be released in its entirety. Both he and Finlayson's family called for the deputy who fired the fatal shots to be prosecuted.

In a statement, the department said the case would undergo a "robust review process" to determine whether the shooting was legally justified and whether prosecutors will file criminal charges.

"In the effort of transparency, the department will be releasing the body-worn camera footage of the incident by next week, which is earlier than the required time frame," the statement said. "The department is deeply committed to protecting our diverse communities without bias and prejudice."

Previously, [the](#) department identified the deputy involved in the shooting as Ty Shelton. Shelton did not immediately respond to The Times' request for comment.

The fatal encounter started after Finlayson called 911 for help because her former boyfriend was strangling her and trying to hurt her daughter, according to [Gage's](#) claim, which serves as the precursor to a lawsuit.

At some point before deputies arrived, 9-year-old Xaisha Davis said she handed her mother a knife.

"He was hurting my mother and me," the girl told reporters Thursday. "I didn't have [any] choice but to get something sharp."

According to the claim, Finlayson was sitting on the ground inside her home and "not threatening anyone" when deputies showed up and opened fire from outside, striking her four times through a sliding glass door.

"She called for help and cried out in pain," according to the claim. "Her 9-year-old witnessed the entire murder and her mother's suffering."

Gage said Finlayson's estranged boyfriend told deputies there was no reason for them to shoot the mother of two — and deputies allegedly responded to his statement by beating him up.

The department offered a different account in a news release posted online. When deputies arrived at Finlayson's East Avenue apartment, they could hear shouting inside, according to the release.

"As they attempted to make forced entry into the apartment, a female adult opened the front door, armed with a large kitchen knife," the release said. "Finlayson told deputies she was going to stab her boyfriend for pushing her daughter."

The mother then retreated inside the apartment, the release said, heading toward where her former boyfriend was sitting. Deputies followed her inside and saw Finlayson grab her estranged boyfriend "in an apparent attempt to stab him."

Then, the release said, "a deputy-involved shooting occurred."

Finlayson fell to the floor, dropping the knife. The deputies tried giving first aid until paramedics arrived to take her to a hospital, where she died.

During Thursday's news conference, Xaisha accused officials of lying about her mother's alleged threat to stab her estranged boyfriend.

"I was there," she said. "I know the truth about everything."

The girl said she wanted to see Shelton prosecuted. She spoke about how much she missed her mother, and how she struggled with knowing she'd eventually need to tell her 2-year-old sister what happened.

"She knows Mom is definitely gone, she knows something is wrong," Xaisha said. "It's unfair to my little sister, it's unfair to me."

Shelton was involved in at least [one other](#) fatal shooting in Lancaster, also in response to a domestic violence call. County records show that in 2020 Shelton killed Michael Thomas, 62, as he and another deputy tried to detain him. The deputies said Thomas tried to grab one of their guns. His fiancée disputed that, telling a local TV station that Thomas had refused to let the deputies enter the house and was turning away from them when he was shot.

County records show prosecutors declined to file charges against Shelton in that case, though they acknowledged “there may have been other reasonable options available” to him instead of killing Thomas.

“That’s another case that I will go to my grave believing was completely unjustified,” said Gage, who also represented a member of the Thomas family.

Last week, organizers with the community coalition Cancel the Contract Antelope Valley held a vigil in Lancaster for Finlayson. They called for the release of video of the shooting, the immediate removal of any deputies involved and an independent investigation by the FBI and other federal agencies.

Finlayson’s death marks the third time this year that a deputy’s use of force against a Black woman in the Antelope Valley has attracted attention. In June, a Lancaster deputy responding to a reported robbery threw a woman to the ground as she filmed their interaction outside a WinCo Foods grocery store. In July, [Sheriff](#) Robert Luna released body-camera footage showing a Palmdale deputy punching a young mother in the face while she held her 3-week-old baby in her arms, begging authorities not to take the child. Afterward, the FBI began investigating the incident and the mother [filed a](#) federal lawsuit against the county, which is pending.

In Finlayson’s case, the claim says a possible suit could focus on allegations of wrongful death, assault, civil rights violations and more.

“This is a case about justice,” Gage said. “This is a case about protecting the community.”