

JOURNAL SENTINEL EDITORIAL | DONTRE HAMILTON - Chisholm Makes Tough Decision in Difficult and Tragic Case - Dec. 22, 2014

For many of the friends, family and activists who have gathered around the cause of Dontre Hamilton, Monday was a bitter day: A former Milwaukee police officer will not be charged in the fatal shooting of Hamilton in Red Arrow Park nearly eight months ago.

The decision not to charge Christopher Manney by Milwaukee County District Attorney John Chisholm comes in the context of a national debate over the deaths of African-Americans at the hands of police — from Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., to Eric Garner in New York City.

Hamilton, an African-American, was shot 14 times by Manney, who is white, after a struggle in the downtown park. Hamilton suffered from mental illness and had been sleeping in the park when approached by Manney. Manney was fired by Police Chief Edward Flynn for failing to follow department procedures for dealing with emotionally disturbed people. Mayor Tom Barrett said last week that the city would provide mental health training for all MPD officers. That was overdue, but a good decision.

The frustrations of African-Americans with these cases are understandable. So is the anger of activists who closed I-43 at rush hour on Friday night. The death of Hamilton is a tragedy for his family and for the community at large. Flynn was right to fire Manney — no one should have to die for the offense of sleeping in a park.

And yet it will be important in the coming hours and days that activists channel their anger and frustration productively. Peaceful protests, including street demonstrations, do that. To their credit, Hamilton's family and the demonstrators have urged and practiced restraint in most of the demonstrations. Unfortunately, some activists went too far on Friday night. The march onto I-43 at rush hour was a foolhardy and dangerous act that Flynn quite rightly called a "breach of trust." Flynn noted, correctly, that officers were diverted from patrols in the neighborhoods where they are needed for "baby-sitting a bunch of self-indulgent protesters."

As for the decision not to charge Manney, officer-involved shooting cases are notoriously difficult to prosecute. We're sure Chisholm's decision is deeply disappointing to Hamilton's family and the activists who have taken up the family's cause.

"This was a tragic incident for the Hamilton family and for the community," Chisholm wrote in a statement. "But, based on all the evidence and analysis presented in this report, I come to the conclusion that Officer Manney's use of force in this incident was justified self-defense and that defense cannot be reasonably overcome to establish a basis to charge Officer Manney with a crime."

This was a tragedy. Hamilton should not have died. And yet, the public has not seen all the evidence or heard from all the witnesses as Chisholm has. As that information is being made available to the public, people need to go through it so they can better understand Chisholm's decision and reach their own conclusions. In the meantime, it should trust that the county's elected representative — Chisholm — has done his job and made the best decision under the circumstances.

Those who disagree should express their opinions — loudly if they wish — and they should protest if they wish. But they also should take care to do so peaceably. Anything else only harms the cause they represent and tarnishes the memory of Dontre Hamilton.