

CRIME

Family of LPD man who died after arrest describe lack of access, ask for more transparency



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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Lennis Mitchell died six days after being arrested and becoming unresponsive while in Lafayette police custody.

Mitchell's family is demanding an independent investigation and transparency from the police department.

Police say Mitchell was arrested for domestic battery, fled from officers, and then complained he couldn't breathe.

An initial autopsy showed no signs of foul play, with the official cause of death pending further tests.

LAFAYETTE, IN — The six siblings of the man who became unresponsive in a police car on Sept. 22 want answers as to why Lennis Mitchell died Sunday, six days after he was arrested.

"The family of Lennis Mitchell is devastated by the loss and outraged by the lack of transparency from the Lafayette Police Department," the Mitchells' family attorney, Juneitha Shambee, said in a news release. "Mr. Mitchell entered police custody alive and left in a body bag. We demand a thorough, independent investigation into the actions of the officers involved, including the pursuit and any force used during the arrest."

Mitchell, 36, forced his way into his girlfriend's house in the 1000 block of South Fourth Street about 9:30 a.m. Sept. 22, police said. A man across the street called

police, reporting that Mitchell dragged his girlfriend from her house by the hair and down the porch steps and assaulted her, according to police.

Mitchell ran from police when they arrived, jumping several fences to evade capture, according to police. When they caught him, he was winded and told officers [he couldn't breathe](#). A neighbor said he heard Mitchell screaming he couldn't breathe as officers walked him to a police car to take him to the hospital.

On the porch and in the police car, he told officers he had asthma.

"We are looking into that to see if he actually had asthma," Shambee said in an interview. "He believed that was going to be quickest way for him to get to the hospital," she said.

Mitchell lost consciousness in the back of the police car on the drive to the hospital, and the officer performed CPR on him. Shambee said Mitchell never regained consciousness.

He died Sept. 28.

A forensic autopsy Tuesday indicated that there were no signs of foul play and no significant trauma to Mitchell's body. His cause of death is pending toxicology and histology tests, which are microscopic examinations of Mitchell's tissues, Tippecanoe County Coroner Carrie Costello said.

The family heard about Mitchell's hospitalization from his girlfriend, who called Mitchell's family in Chicago on Sept. 22 telling them about his hospitalization, Shambee said.

"They live in Chicago," Shambee said of Mitchell's six siblings. "They called the hospital and were given information originally by the emergency department. The emergency department informed them they should come by.

"When they arrived on that day, he'd already been moved to ICU," she said.

What followed was roughly 24 hours of police and hospital officials refusing to speak with Mitchell's family about his condition, Shambee said.

“When one of the family members spoke with one of the officers that were on scene at the time, they were instructed that, ‘We have nothing to do with that. You have to speak to the hospital about that,’” Shambee said. “But then the hospital told them, ‘Well, we can’t give it because the police told us not to give out any information.’”

Shambee said it is not a violation of HIPAA for the hospital to tell the family of their family member's condition.

The Journal & Courier asked a Lafayette police spokesman whether they instructed the hospital not to inform Mitchell's family members about his condition. He has not replied.

“It just seemed like the blame was being ping-ponged back and forth between the police officers and the hospital,” Shambee said. “This is the information the family received.”

Shambee interceded on the family's behalf the afternoons of Sept. 22, and by Sept. 23 — 24 hours after Mitchell was admitted to the hospital — they were told of Mitchell's condition.

“If he were to recover, he would never be the same again,” Shambee said the family was told of his prognosis.

They still weren't allowed to see him because he was in police custody. It wasn't until a court order on Thursday, Sept. 25, that released him from police custody that the family could see him.

What they saw in the ICU was traumatic, Shambee said. He was hooked up to machines and unconscious. Still, they hugged him as best they could and spoke with him, hoping he could hear their voices in whatever state his mind might be.

“They were heartbroken,” Shambee said of Mitchell's siblings' reactions. “He is the youngest of six. They were devastated.”

Mitchell was a happy man, Shambee said. “He was always joyous, laughing.

“I believe he moved to Indiana to be with his girlfriend, who was at that time the love of his life,” Shambee said.

Lafayette police published a video late Monday afternoon explaining what happened seven days earlier.

More: [Lafayette police briefing video about Lennis Mitchell's arrest](#)

"The Lafayette Police Department's goal with this briefing is to remain open and transparent with our community by sharing the details of what occurred and the actions taken by our officers," the video states.

The Mitchell family is asking for more candor.

“All we’re doing right now is seeking answers,” she said. “All we’re doing right now is asking for the reports, the bodycam, the in-car camera, all the footage from the police department. We’re just seeking answers.

“We’re just asking for transparency.”

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