

Illinois sheriff asks public for forgiveness

'We failed her. We did not do our jobs,' he says of Massey's death

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — An Illinois sheriff who hired the deputy charged with killing Sonya Massey in her own kitchen asked for the public's forgiveness Monday, saying that the 36-year-old woman "called for help and we failed her."

"We failed Sonya and the community," Sangamon County Sheriff Jack Campbell told a packed hall of about 300 people at on Monday night. "I ask your forgiveness."

The Justice Department's community relations service organized the "listening session" for the grieving community about three weeks after Massey's killing. Sean Grayson, who was a Sangamon County Sheriff's deputy at the time of the July 6 shooting, has since been fired and is charged with murder after responding to Massey's 911 call about a possible intruder at her home.

"Sonya Massey. I will say her name and I'll never forget her," Campbell told the crowd Monday. "I cannot imagine the pain that her family and friends feel right now. I'm sorry ... We did not do our jobs." The audience applauded.

Justice officials opened a federal probe into Massey's killing as chaotic and gruesome body camera footage released last week revealed harrowing details of the case. Massey was fatally shot in the face by Grayson, who ordered her to put down a pot of boiling water, according to a transcript.

Her death has sparked national outcry and renewed calls for police reform, with vigils held from coast to coast.

Former Springfield Mayor Jim Langfelder said the fatal shooting of Massey set Springfield back "100 years," a reference to the Springfield Race Riot of 1908 that gave rise to the NAACP in 1909.

Calls for accountability

Campbell said Monday he would not step down after community members called for his resignation, contending it



Sangamon (Ill.) County Sheriff Jack Campbell said Monday he would not step down after community members called for his resignation, contending it would not solve anything if he did. STEVEN SPEARIE/SPRINGFIELD STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

would not solve anything if he did.

"I stand here before you with my arms wide open and I ask for your forgiveness, and I ask Ms. Massey and her family for her forgiveness. I offer up no excuses," Campbell told the crowd.

James Wilburn, Massey's father, has been critical of the sheriff's department's hiring of Grayson and previously called on Campbell to resign. Several speakers in the public comment section Monday night joined him in calling for Campbell's resignation, while others threatened to vote him out. The sheriff ran unopposed for his second term in 2022 and stands for reelection in 2026.

The Rev. T. Ray McJunkins, who hosted the community event, said the gathering had a purpose of "not letting this die out as another incident that happened."

"We are grieving, and the first stage of grief is that we talk about it, to express ourselves, not assassinate anyone," McJunkins said. "God also requires us to do justice. We want to start the healing process tonight."

Theodis Pace, president of the Illinois State Conference of the NAACP, said the event was to address systemic issues that contribute to incidents like

the fatal shooting of Massey while giving the community a chance to express their concerns.

"We insist on accountability and justice for Sonya and her family," Pace added. "We must scrutinize our law enforcement practices, challenge the systemic biases that exist and work tirelessly to rebuild the trust that has been broken."

'Shock the conscience of America'

Monday's meeting was the latest emotional stirring that Massey's death has brought to the nation.

Civil rights attorney Ben Crump said at Massey's funeral the body camera video would "shock the conscience of America like the pictures of Emmett Till after he was lynched." The 1955 death of the 14-year-old in Mississippi helped galvanize the Civil Rights Movement.

Crump added that the video would garner similar reactions to Laquan McDonald, who was shot by police 16 times in the back in Chicago in 2014, and George Floyd, who was killed by a Minneapolis police officer during an arrest in 2020.

"It is that senseless, that unneces-

sary, that unjustifiable, that unconstitutional," Crump said. "This video is tragic in every sense."

Massey fatally shot in her kitchen

Massey called 911 to report a possible intruder in her Springfield home on July 6. Thirty minutes later, she was dead.

According to charging documents, Grayson drew his gun and threatened to shoot Massey in the face. Grayson "aggressively yelled" for her to put down a pot of boiling water. As Grayson drew closer to Massey, he fired three times at about 1:21 a.m., striking her once in the face.

Massey had put her hands in the air, said "I'm sorry" and ducked for cover, charging documents detailed.

Grayson had not activated his body-worn camera until then, though another sheriff's deputy had his activated after arriving at Massey's house.

Massey's death is the latest police killing to sweep the nation as civil rights advocates sound the alarm on the rise of such incidents. A Mapping Police Violence report released earlier this year found that 2023 was the deadliest year for police killings in the U.S.

Police killed more than 1,300 people in 2023, a year that saw several high-profile cases, including the fatal beating of Tyre Nichols in Memphis, Tennessee, the shooting of an environmental activist who was protesting the construction of a police and fire training center near Atlanta, and the death of a Virginia man who was "smothered" in a hospital.

There were only 14 days without a police killing last year and on average, law enforcement officers killed someone every 6.6 hours, according to the report, which is primarily based on news reports and includes data from state and local government agencies.

The number of such killings has risen since Campaign Zero, which runs the Mapping Police Violence project, began tracking the data in 2013.

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