

CHIEF'S INITIAL FACEBOOK STATEMENT – 8/25/23

Statement from Police Chief John Belford.

(Full Text of Chief's Statement Below. Includes typos.)

I want to brief the community on a tragedy that recently occurred which resulted in the unfortunate loss of life of a local woman.

Last night, Blendon Township police officers were assisting a driver locked out of her car in the Kroger parking lot on Sunbury Road. As the officers were helping, a Kroger employee pointed out to one of the officers that someone who had stolen bottles of alcohol from the store was -- at that moment -- fleeing. Store employees later reported that several suspects had been stealing items, but the other suspects had fled in other cars. However, this particular female suspects who had been pointed out to the officer, was in a Lexus sedan with no license tags parked in a handicapped spot right in front of the store.

The woman started the car. One officer approached from the driver's side and ordered the woman to stop and get out of the car. She ignored the order. Another officer came in front of the car and also ordered the woman to get out of the car. Despite being ordered to get out of the car more than a dozen times, she refused to do so.

The women put the car in gear and accelerated forward. The officer who was directly in the path of the oncoming car fired one shot through the front windshield. The body camera footage I've reviewed also confirms the officer was directly in the path of the car.

The car kept moving and officers ran after it for about 50 feet. It then came to a stop on the sidewalk outside the store. Because the driver's door had been locked, officers immediately broke the driver's window so they could attend to the woman and begin medical assistance. They also immediately called for EMS. The officer who fired the shot sprinted to his car to get a trauma kit, which he quickly employed. A passing ER doctor assisted. The woman died at St. Ann's hospital, which was the closest ER.

I wanted a thorough and independent review of this incident. That's why I immediately asked the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation to handle the investigation. Our department is fully cooperating with them. Out of an abundance of caution, I put both officers on administrative leave.

While this woman had previously been charged with crimes involving theft and fleeing from police, our officers did not know that at the time. Following the Bureau of Criminal Investigation's work, I will do the normal review to determine if policies and procedures were followed. In every case, we hold employees accountable if they violate policies, procedures, or the law.

We will release the body camera footage of this incident as soon as the necessary legal redactions can be made. Recent changes in Ohio law regarding the rights of victims to have personally identifying information protected as well as statutory redactions of certain items that must be blurred make the release of this kind of video complicated.

Nonetheless, we will act with as much transparency as we legally can.

Every loss of life is a tragedy. The family of the woman who died is understandably upset. I've personally spoken with a member of the family, and I will continue to keep them informed about what's happening.

The next steps in this matter will come from the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, which is actively reviewing all the facts. The community deserves to know the truth. We're committed to transparency, and we will be accountable for everything we do. Thank you.