



MIDDLETOWN

Details elusive after officer's highway death

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STAFF WRITERS

Authorities still haven't charged, cited or named the driver of a car that pinned Middletown detective Chris Jones beneath his own patrol cruiser on the Route 1 Superhighway more than two months ago.

And investigators won't answer questions.

On Jan. 29, Jones was killed while walking back to his patrol car after issuing a ticket when a Toyota struck Jones' police cruiser, pushing the police car on top of him. His cruiser was on the shoulder of the highway.

The 37-year-old husband and father of three was pronounced dead a few hours later.

The driver of the Toyota, who had to be cut from his car, reportedly broke a leg and was treated at St. Mary Medical Center in Middletown for several days. County detectives obtained warrants for samples of the driver's blood to be taken at the hospital the night of the accident.

Officials will say the man lives in Middletown but they won't release his name, address or age.

"This is a complex case and the matter is still under investigation," District Attorney Michelle Henry said Thursday.

However, a rumor circulating among some police officers in Lower Bucks is that no charges will be forthcoming. None talked on the record, though.

"I'm very concerned about this taking so long," said Democrat Middletown Supervisor Chuck Thompson. "It seems like these kinds of investigations should be over in a week or two. It's not like this is something that happened in the middle of the night on a path in the woods. It happened during the day on a major highway."

Republican Supervisor Jasper Caro said he isn't concerned that the investigation is ongoing but declined further comment.

Other township officials, including Acting Public Safety Director Patrick McGinty also have declined to comment, referring questions to the district attorney.

Although the toxicology reports are in the DA's hands, Henry declined to release their results. She also declined to answer specific questions about the cause of the delay.

A glance at some recent accidents in which someone was either injured or killed shows that the release of information was handled differently in many cases.

In some serious accidents, drivers have been identified within days whether charges were filed immediately or down the road or no one was charged. In others, names were withheld until charges were filed. And there appears to be no set timeline for charging suspects. Authorities have said each case is different.

Henry has said the Jan. 29 accident involves several complex issues centered on the reconstruction.

Last year, in a case that also relied heavily on accident reconstruction, Laurence Thompson, 48, of Bensalem was charged nine months after the accident in which his 51-year-old ex-girlfriend was killed. His name was released March 15, the day of the accident.

According to police, Thompson claimed he wasn't driving. However, Bensalem investigators reconstructed the accident with evidence, including pieces of glass found in the victim's hair and signs that the driver's seatbelt had been in use at the time of the crash and the passenger's had not. They determined the basic movements and speed of the vehicle using tire marks and scars on

the road, according to police. Thompson is awaiting trial on charges of homicide by vehicle while driving under the influence of alcohol and related offenses filed in December.

An independent firm was brought in and reviewed the reconstruction and concurred with investigators.

The DA declined to comment on whether an independent agency was involved in the investigation of the accident that killed Jones.

Just a few weeks after Jones was killed, an Upper Makefield police officer had to leap over a guard rail and fell down an embankment when a speeding car slid into an abandoned vehicle he was checking on the roadside. He suffered two broken ribs and severe bruising on his lower back and hip. The name of the driver was not released until more than a month later when he was cited for speeding and failure to keep right.

In some cases, the names and charges came quickly:

In August 2005, a Bristol Township man was charged and his name released within hours after he critically injured two Bristol Township police officers in a car accident.

George Buschle was drunk and had fallen asleep at the wheel when he drove into police officers Mike Egan and Mark Buzby. They were standing in the roadway investigating an accident.

Buschle was arrested and charged with aggravated assault on a police officer and related charges a few hours later. However, he'd admitted drinking and having driven to New York City twice since last sleeping.

Both cops survived the accident, although Egan lost his left leg and Buzby's right leg required numerous surgeries. Buschle is serving a prison sentence of four to 14 years.

Later that year, an 18-year-old Philadelphia woman struck a pregnant woman in Bensalem — killing the unborn baby. The driver was identified two days later, and charged 11 days after that with aggravated assault after marijuana and painkillers were found in her bloodstream. She spent less than six months in prison and was released into a rehab facility.

Defense attorney Richard Patton, a former county and exstate prosecutor, was charged with DUI not long after his truck struck and killed his girlfriend, Heather Demou, in the parking lot of a Newtown Township restaurant in April 2007. Charges with heavier penalties, including homicide by vehicle, were added by the state Attorney General's Office almost eight months later, following a grand jury inquiry.

Patton was acquitted in Demou's death but sentenced to three to 23 months in the county jail for driving drunk and recklessly.

Authorities have said they are unable to comment on whether details of the accident have been brought before a grand jury. Officials with knowledge of grand jury proceedings are sworn to secrecy by state law.

In other cases, the name of a driver was released quickly because he or she was injured in the accident:

In March 2007, police released the name of a 19-year-old driver on the same day as a fatal accident in Middletown in which a 16-year-old female passenger was killed.

However, the teen driver suffered serious injuries in the accident and was placed in a city hospital intensive-care unit. His name and those of four others injured in the crash were released before police released the name of the deceased 16-year-old.

The boy wasn't charged with homicide by vehicle until May. He was acquitted of the homicide by vehicle charge but convicted of DUI for the South Flowers Mill Road crash.

A Lower Southampton man's name was released the day of a fatal accident on I-95 in Bensalem in June 2007. One passenger died in the accident; another died less than a week later. The driver was treated for minor injuries. The driver was charged with homicide by vehicle while DUI and several other charges about a month after the second passenger's death and eventually pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 3½ to 10 years in prison. And then there are times where the release of a name and the filing of charges wait:

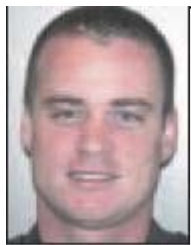
In November, a Falls man was charged with homicide by vehicle, five months after allegedly striking and killing a 35-year-old

Bristol Township man on a church lawn in the township.

The 27-year-old was driving recklessly shortly before 8 p.m. June 10 when he swerved off eastbound New Falls Road onto the front lawn of the Emilie United Methodist Church in an attempt to speed past a van. His car struck a man as he walked through the grass.

The driver pleaded guilty in March.

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Chris Jones



George Buschle



Richard Patton