

Woman's death in police custody ruled a homicide

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CLEVELAND — The Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner's Office has classified the November death of a 37-year-old woman who was in police custody as a homicide.

Tanisha Anderson died Nov. 12 at hospital after being handcuffed, taken into custody by Cleveland police and then losing consciousness while having a mental-health episode.

Relatives said the 37-year-old was schizophrenic, and they claimed an officer used excessive force.

According to the medical examiner, Anderson's death was caused by a "sudden death associated with physical restraint" in a lying face-down position. The medical examiner also cited her heart disease and bipolar disorder.

The homicide ruling doesn't mean a crime was committed, just that the officers' actions were a factor in Anderson's death.

In a statement, Cleveland Police Department said its own use of force investigation team is looking into the death. The two officers involved are on restricted duty, the department said.

"Our hearts go out to her family," said Steve Loomis, president of the Cleveland Police Patrolmen's Union. "The officers responded exactly as they were trained to do. ... We're not surprised by the findings. She had previous medical conditions."

Anderson's family has raised questions about the Cleveland department's policy when dealing with people who have a mental illness. They have demanded a thorough criminal investigation and an independent prosecutor.

The family claims that on the night police were called to the home, officers wrestled Anderson in a take-down. She lost consciousness and died later at the Cleveland Clinic

"It was a crime," said Michael Nelson, co-chairman of the NAACP's Criminal Justice Committee. "The person was killed by the officer. The person's head was slammed on the ground. They were choked to death. ... We believe an indictment should result."

The family called on police to be trained according to standards set by advocacy groups for the mentally ill.

A recent Department of Justice report found Cleveland police engage in a pattern of using excessive force and specifically mentioned treatment of the mentally ill as an issue.

Federal investigators spent 18 months looking into use of force policies in Cleveland after a series of well-publicized incidents, including the killing of two unarmed civilians in a hail of police gunfire after a high-speed chase.

The Justice Department's finding will force the city to devise a plan to reform the police department. That plan must be approved by a federal judge and will be overseen by an independent monitor.

Contributing: The Associated Press