

Ex-cop indicted in '06 death

DeKalb takes action on grand jury findings in shooting of unarmed suspect during chase.

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A DeKalb County police officer who shot an unarmed suspect faces a murder trial and a possible life prison sentence in the only criminal prosecution stemming from a rash of police slayings of suspects in DeKalb in 2006.

Torrey Thompson, 31, was indicted by a DeKalb grand jury Thursday, District Attorney Gwen Keyes Fleming announced. He resigned from the police department less than two months after the fatal shooting of 21-year-old Lorenzo Matthews on Sept. 12, 2006.

In a press conference Thursday evening after posting \$100,000 bond at DeKalb County Jail, Thompson and his attorney proclaimed his innocence and desire to fight the felony charges against him.

"This was a tragic event. Everyone is praying to keep ourselves strong and put this behind us," a soft-spoken Thompson said, flanked by family and friends.

Several colleagues from the Barrow County Sheriff's Office — where Thompson worked following the shooting until he resigned Thursday — also came to support Thompson.

"It means everything to have them here," Thompson said. "They know what it's like to be there. The saddest part is they have to go through it with me."

Originally, police said Matthews was shot as he fled an armed robbery scene and came upon two officers who in dim light thought Matthews made a threatening gesture. However, a police department internal review board report released this year found Thompson fired as Matthews ran away and fired again later during a foot chase when Matthews did not present a sufficient threat.

Bill Atkins, Thompson's attorney, hinted at his defense in an upcoming trial. Atkins said his research showed that in the time it would take an officer to decide and then to fire his weapon, a suspect could turn completely around.

"In light of all of the evidence, a jury will have no trouble understanding why Torrey Thompson took the action he took," Atkins said. "I stand next to an innocent man. He did his duty that night."

A special grand jury that spent a year reviewing 12 fatal shootings of suspects by DeKalb police and other fatal police shootings in the county in 2006 recommended in March that Keyes Fleming conduct a criminal investigation of Thompson. He was the only DeKalb officer targeted by the grand jury for possible prosecution.

The grand jury also recommended prosecutors investigate officers from several federal agencies who fatally shot a suspect in Lithonia while trying to arrest him on weapons charges.

But federal authorities have declined to prosecute the case, according to a July 8 letter from U.S. Attorney David Nahmias. Nahmias said a review of evidence in the Oct. 25, 2006, shooting of Youwus Vilpre did not "support criminal charges or warrant further investigation."

Thompson was indicted Thursday for felony murder, a charge that a death occurred during the commission of a felony, in this case an aggravated assault. He also was indicted for the lesser charges of voluntary manslaughter and violating his oath of office.

Atkins said Thompson had an "impeccable record" with no prior incidents in DeKalb or since in Barrow. Thompson was a Marine for six years, discharged at the rank of sergeant before coming to work in DeKalb. He worked embassy security in Cyprus and Peru, the latter assignment during a 2003 terrorist attack.