ELEVENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF FLORIDA E. R. GRAHAM BUILDING 1350 N.W. 12TH AVENUE MIAMI, FLORIDA 33136-2111

KATHERINE FERNANDEZ RUNDLE STATE ATTORNEY

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February 7, 2020

Sergio Velazquez, Chief of Police Hialeah Police Department 5555 E. 8 Avenue Hialeah, FL 33013

Dear Chief Velazquez:

Enclosed is our final report regarding the investigation into the police-involved shooting of Rafael Armas Valdeolla on January 4, 2019. The officers involved in this incident were Detectives Juan Fernandez (04-1790) and Richard Aguero (04-1993).

The investigation has determined that these officers were the only witnesses to the shooting, and they declined to provide sworn statements. In the absence of witness statements, we do not have sufficient evidence to determine whether these officers were legally justified in their use of deadly force by firing their weapons. However, considering all of the facts, we cannot in good faith proceed with criminal charges against the shooting officers.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

KATHERINE FERNANDEZ RUNDLE

State Attorney

KFR:iah

cc: Listed Officer(s)
HPD Internal Affairs
Sgt. Thomas Reyes, (FOP)
Robert Senior (AUSA)
Troy Walker (FDLE)
Enclosure



### INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO:

KATHERINE FERNANDEZ RUNDLE

State Attorney

DATE:

February 7, 2020

FROM: STAFFING/REVIEW TEAM

RE:

POLICE SHOOTING CLOSEOUT MEMO

CASE#

SAO #62/19/01/04/011

DECEASED: VALDEOLLA, Rafael Armas

Based on the information obtained and reviewed during the course of the investigation, the conclusion of the staffing/review team is the following: While investigating an armed robbery of a store, Detectives Juan Fernandez and Richard Aguero viewed video surveillance footage of the incident and recognized the offender as a known robber in the area. Additionally, the victim identified Rafael Armas Valdeolla from a photo line-up as the person who robbed her.

Detectives Fernandez and Aguero were also aware of a BOLO (Be On the Look-Out) that had been issued for Valdeolla reference a carjacking that had occurred days earlier. The vehicle stolen was a Kia sedan. Hours after the store robbery, Detectives Fernandez and Aguero located the stolen Kia and followed it as it went into a trailer park. Valdeolla was the front seat passenger. The driver was later identified as Nestor Garcia Mendez. The Kia came to a stop and Detective Aguero stopped his police car behind it. Shortly thereafter, a police-involved shooting occurred. Both Detective Fernandez and Detective Aguero fired at the Kia and its occupants. Valdeolla was fatally wounded and Garcia Mendez was injured.

Days later in an interview, Garcia Mendez admitted knowing the Kia was a stolen car. He also admitted having the gun used in the store robbery and pointing it out of the window of the vehicle when Detective Aguero had stopped behind it at the trailer park. Based on the results of this investigation, it does not appear that either Valdeolla or Garcia Mendez fired any weapon during the shooting incident.

In this case, there is some circumstantial evidence that suggests their decision to use deadly force could have been legally justified. However, both officers have declined to provide sworn statements regarding the shooting. In the absence of information directly from them about the incident (or body-worn camera footage of the shooting) we do not have sufficient evidence to make a finding that Detectives Juan Fernandez (04-1790) or Richard Aguero (04-1993) were legally justified in their use of deadly force.

The members of the staffing/review team for this case are:

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Don L. Horn

Deisy Hernandez

Stephen K. Talpins

Howard Rosen

Kathleen Hoague

Scott Dunn

Christine Zahralban

Approved by State Attorney on this

2020.

KATHERINE FERNANDEZ RUNDLE

State Attorney



## INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: STAFFING/REVIEW TEAM

DATE: JANUARY 14, 2020

FROM: LAURA ADAMS AND

ALICIA PRIOVOLOS

ASSISTANT STATE ATTORNEYS

RE: POLICE SHOOTING CLOSEOUT MEMO

OFFICER(S) INVOLVED:	DETECTIVE JUAN FERNANDEZ (04-1790) DETECTIVE RICHARD AGUERO (04-1993)
DECEASED: INJURED:	RAFAEL ARMAS VALDEOLLA NESTOR GARCIA-MENDEZ
INJURIES:	VALDEOOLLA: PERFORATING GUNSHOT WOUND OF HEAD GARCIA-MENDEZ: GUNSHOT WOUND TO HEAD AND FACE
DATE & TIME:	JANUARY 4, 2019 AT 1:54 A.M.
LOCATION:	NW 76 STREET AND NW 29 COURT
WEAPONS:	NESTOR GARCIA MENDEZ: GLOCK MODEL 43 SERIAL NUMBER ACVZ812 DETECTIVE FERNANDEZ: GLOCK MODEL 19 SERIAL NUMBER BBM566 DETECTIVE AGUERO: GLOCK MODEL 19 SERIAL NUMBER BAAE034
LEAD:	DETECTIVE MAGELA MONTALVO (04-1786)
SAO CASE # POLICE CASE::	62/19/01/04/001 HIALEAH POLICE CASE 2019-000306

## **STATEMENT OF FACTS**

On the night of January 3, 2019 going into the early morning hours of January 4, 2019, City of Hialeah Police Detectives Juan Fernandez and Richard Aguero were working in their official capacity as robbery detectives. They were in police tactical uniforms and in unmarked police cars. They were assigned to investigate an armed robbery that had occurred that night at about 9:52 p.m. at the El Globo Dollar Discount Store. They responded to the scene of this robbery and interviewed the victim. Upon viewing video surveillance footage of the robbery from the store, Detective Aguero recognized the offender as a man named Rafael Armas Valdeolla (hereinafter "the decedent"), because the decedent was a known robber in the area. A photographic lineup was produced, and at 11:06 p.m., the victim positively identified the decedent as the person who robbed her at gunpoint. Thus, Detectives Fernandez and Aguero had probable cause to believe that the decedent had committed an armed robbery.

Detectives Fernandez and Aguero also knew that there was a BOLO for the decedent for an armed carjacking that occurred on December 30, 2018, which was being investigated by the Miami-Dade Police Department under case number PD181230473172. The vehicle that was stolen in that carjacking was a Kia sedan, with a tag of IRUW13. At approximately 1:57 a.m. on January 4, 2019, about four (4) hours after the El Globo Dollar Discount Store robbery, Detective Aguero located the stolen Kia in the area of N.W. 37 Court and N.W. 79th Street. He began to follow the vehicle, which went into a trailer park. The driver of the vehicle, who was later identified as Nestor Garcia Mendez, came to a stop in a parking area of the trailer park. The decedent was the front seat passenger. There also was a woman named Geilyn Espinosa Acosta seated in the backseat of the Kia. Detective Aguero stopped his police car directly behind the Kia. In an interview two (2) days after this incident, Garcia Mendez admitted that he pointed the firearm used in the El Globo robbery out the window of the vehicle; Detective Aguero began to fire at the Kia from behind it. Meanwhile, Detective Fernandez arrived moments later and stopped his vehicle just west of the chain link fence that surrounds the trailer park. He exited his police car and began firing at the front part of the Kia. There were multiple gunshot holes in the front and rear windshield of the Kia and of Detective Aguero's vehicle. A Toyota Corolla, that was parked just to the north of the Kia, was also damaged from gunshots. After the shooting, the Kia was found with its engine running in reverse gear, but it was prevented from going backwards by Detective Aguero's vehicle.

The driver of the stolen Kia vehicle, Nestor Garcia Mendez, sustained a non-fatal gunshot wound to the head and face. The front seat passenger of the vehicle, Rafael Armas Valdeolla, sustained a fatal, perforating gunshot wound to the head. The back seat passenger, Geilyn Espinosa Acosta, was unharmed during the shooting. Neither Detective Fernandez nor Detective Aguero were injured in the shooting. Officers who responded to the shooting found a Glock model 43 firearm on the roof of the Kia on the driver's side, though it is not entirely clear how the weapon wound up there. Evidence from the scene, including the firearm on the Kia roof, as well as multiple casings, projectiles and other items were photographed, documented and impounded. Gunshot residue swabs were collected from the individuals who had been in the Kia. Also, Detectives Fernandez and Aguero were swabbed for gunshot residue and photographed that night, and their service weapons were impounded as evidence. Detectives Fernandez and Aguero declined to provide a statement or proffer as to why they fired at the Kia and its occupants.

## **SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATION**

#### A. Autopsy

An autopsy was conducted on the body of Rafael Armas Valdeolla. Associate Medical Examiner Fintan Garavan determined that the cause of death was a gunshot wound of the head. The projectile entered the deceased's left cheek about 16 centimeters from the top of his head. It continued through the oral cavity, causing fragmentation of multiple teeth and a laceration to his tongue. The projectile exited through the right side of the neck about 21 centimeters below the top of the head. The pathway of the projectile (with the body in anatomical position) was left to right, downwards, and from front to back. There were several projectile fragments recovered from inside the deceased's mouth, but according to firearms examiner John Mancini, they were too small to be matched to any particular weapon. Thus, there is no way to determine conclusively whether it was a bullet from the weapon of Detective Fernandez or Detective Aguero which killed the decedent. Toxicology results for a sample of the deceased's blood that was collected on January 4, 2019 at 2:36 a.m. revealed that he had a blood alcohol level of .062. Additionally, benzodiazepines, chlordiazepoxide, norchlordiazepoxide, nordiazepam, demoxiepam, benzoylecgonine, cocaine, cocaethylene, ethylegcgonine, methylecgonine, and cannabinoids and THC were found in his blood.

# B. <u>Firearms Examination</u>

There were three (3) firearms recovered in this case: the Glock model 17 firearms that belonged to Detectives Fernandez and Aguero, and the Glock model 43, which was found on the roof of the Kia. Each of these firearms (and the magazines that accompanied them) were found to be in working condition. Note that the Glock model 43 on the roof of the Kia was found with its slide pulled back. While the slide will go to that position after the weapon has fired all bullets in the magazine, there is no proof that this weapon was fired during the course of the shooting. Thus, it is possible that one of the officers involved in this shooting could have pulled the slide back to verify that the weapon was unloaded and placed it on the roof of the vehicle for safekeeping.

In addition, multiple casings were recovered from the scene and submitted for an examination. Firearms examiner John Mancini determined that eleven (11) of the casings (which were collected in the vicinity of Detective Fernandez' vehicle and next to the Corolla which was parked just to the north of the Kia) were fired from Detective Fernandez' firearm. He also determined that the remaining fifty (50) casings which were recovered (in the general vicinity of Detective Aguero's vehicle) were fired from Detective Aguero's firearm. There were three (3) empty firearm magazines found among the casings which were fired by Detective Aguero, presumably because in the course of firing at the Kia, Detective Aguero emptied those clips. There was also one (1) live round found among the casings from Detective Aguero's vehicle, which was the same brand as the rest of his ammunition (Lugar +P). No casings were recovered that were fired from the Glock model 43 that was found on the Kia roof.

Projectile fragments were also recovered in this case. Specifically, three (3) fragments were recovered from under the Kia once it was removed by a tow truck. Also, five (5) fragments were recovered from inside Detective Aguero's police car, on the driver's side in front and back. Four (4) fragments were found inside the Kia, and two (2) fragments were found in the Corolla, which was parked just north of the Kia. Firearms examiner Mancini indicated that any of these fragments could have been fired from the weapons of either Detectives Fernandez or Aguero, but there were insufficient characteristics to state for certain that they were fired from either of these weapons.

# C. Gunshot Residue ("GSR") Examination

Gunshot residue swabs were collected from Detectives Fernandez and Aguero, as well as from the occupants of the Kia: Nestor Garcia Mendez (driver); Rafael Armas Valdeolla (front seat passenger/decedent); and Geilyn Espinosa Acosta (back seat passenger). The results were as follows:

- 1. Both detectives' GSR kits were positive for the presence of primer residue particles.
- 2. Nestor Garcia Mendez' and Geilyn Espinosa Acosta's GSR kits were negative for primer residue particles.
- 3. Rafael Armas Valdeolla's GSR kit showed the presence of one (1) primer residue particle, which is an insufficient quantity and precludes a more conclusive determination.

# D. Witness Interviews

Many potential witnesses were interviewed in the course of this investigation. For example, the police conducted an area canvas of the trailer park and spoke with residents who were home at the time of the shooting but did not actually see it. For a summary of all witness statements, please see the report of Detective Montalvo; for the actual recordings, please see the DVD's in the file. The following is a summary of the statements of those witnesses with the most salient information about this matter:

## Geilyn Espinosa Acosta

Ms. Acosta was a back-seat passenger in the Kia at the time of the shooting, but did not sustain any injuries in this incident. Immediately after the shooting, she was detained for questioning; however, she appeared to be under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, so she was brought to the Hialeah Police Department and provided with some food and water and time to "sober up" prior to being interviewed. During her interview, she advised that although she did not live at the trailer park where the shooting occurred, she would sometimes stay over there. She said that at around 11:30 the night before the shooting, she was "hanging out" in the trailer park. (Note that this was about an hour and a half after the El Globo robbery). While there, she saw the Kia drive into the trailer park, and the driver (Nestor Garcia Mendez) asked her if she wanted to go with him and the front seat passenger (the decedent) to smoke crack. She indicated that she did not know them, but agreed to go with them anyway. She said they smoked crack in the vehicle, then they drove to a gas station at N.W. 151st Street and 22nd Avenue (a U-Gas station), where the men bought several cans of beer. She said after they left that gas station, they went to another one near E. 25th Street and 8th Avenue (Valero gas station) in Hialeah where they bought two more alcoholic drinks.

Next, they went to a motel at Palm Avenue and 13<sup>th</sup> Street in Hialeah. (Note that there is video surveillance footage which corroborates this information). She said that in the motel room, she and the men smoked crack cocaine; she said the decedent took a shower and that she performed consensual oral sex on Garcia Mendez. Then she said the men left the motel room, and when they came back in, Garcia Mendez had a firearm on the right side of his waistband. She said the decedent asked Garcia Mendez if he wanted to continue to smoke crack or to "work" and that Garcia Mendez said "let's drop her off and continue working." She said at that point, they got into the Kia and Garcia Mendez drove her back to the trailer park.

While on the way to the trailer park, Acosta stated that Garcia Mendez was holding the firearm on his lap. She said when they arrived in the trailer park, she felt and heard a loud noise like if someone crashed into them. Moments later, she heard many gunshots and saw Garcia Mendez looking back over his right shoulder as if he was shooting. However, she said she couldn't see his hands because she was crouching down to avoid being shot. She wasn't able to see if the decedent had a firearm during the shooting. She did not notice any blue or red lights prior to the shooting, and she did not know about the prior robberies that the men had committed. Acosta agreed to go with the police to show them the motel she went to with the men, as well as the two (2) gas stations.

#### Christian Jesus Diaz

Christian Jesus Diaz was not immediately known to the police as a witness in this case. However, he was interviewed by a local news channel and based on his statements on the news program, the police determined it would be important to speak with him about this case. On the day after the shooting, January 5, 2019, he was located inside the trailer park at around 5:45 pm, and he agreed to go to the Hialeah Police Station to provide a statement about what had occurred. Diaz stated that on the night of the shooting, he was walking to a friend's house within the trailer park. While walking, he saw a dark Crown Victoria (Detective Aguero's vehicle) entering the trailer park. Moments later, he heard an impact and looked in the direction of the vehicle. He saw the Kia in front of the Crown Victoria and an officer exiting the Crown Victoria wearing a bullet proof vest. He continued by indicating that he heard the officer giving numerous loud verbal commands to the occupants of the Kia, saying "police, police, put your hands on the steering wheel." He said right after that, he saw the driver of the Kia put his hand

out the driver's side door and shoot twice at the officer. The officer then ran behind his police car and returned fire. Witness Diaz said he then ran away from the scene and took cover.

#### Nestor Garcia Mendez

During the course of the shooting, Nestor Garcia Mendez sustained a gunshot wound to the head/face. He was brought to Jackson Memorial for treatment. At about 4:00 pm on January 6, 2019, he was interviewed in a recorded statement by Detectives Montalvo and Elosegui. Prior to interviewing him, the officers were advised by medical personnel that he had not been given any mind-altering medications since 2:00 pm, and that he was mentally alert. Garcia Mendez was advised of his Miranda rights, and indicated he understood his rights and would be willing to speak with them. During the statement, he spoke (in Spanish) very quietly and parts of the recording are difficult to hear. However, Garcia Mendez did admit that he had borrowed a gun from a friend/co-worker and that he gave that gun to the decedent. He admitted to knowing about the El Globo Dollar Store robbery and that the car they were in was stolen. He also admitted to taking some of the proceeds from that robbery to purchase crack cocaine. He said that when he stopped the Kia, he pointed the firearm out the window. He also said that the officer told him "Police put your hands up."

#### Jose Antonio Escandell

Jose Antonio Escandell advised the police that he had known Nestor Garcia Mendez for several years, and that they work together at GB Best Rolling Door. He stated that at 5:00 pm the night before the incident, he saw Garcia Mendez in the area of Palm Avenue and 16<sup>th</sup> Street in Hialeah. Shortly thereafter, he indicated a bald older male (presumably the decedent) arrived in a Kia and bragged that he had stolen that vehicle from a female and that man showed a knife he was carrying. Escandell said that Garcia Mendez asked to borrow a firearm due to problems in "the streets." Escandell indicated that he refused that request and that he then left the area.

Escandell then said that about an hour later, Garcia Mendez arrived at his (Escandell's) home in a different vehicle. He asked again if he could borrow Escandell's weapon. Escandell said that Garcia Mendez was acting aggressively, and that he gave a firearm to him to avoid any problems. Escandell told Garcia Mendez he did not have any ammunition for the weapon and that it was not loaded. Escandell stated that Garcia Mendez took the weapon and left the residence. He also advised the police that, in

fact, he did have five live Lugar rounds in his home. He gave the police consent for them to search for the rounds, and they were recovered. It should be noted that the weapon Escandell gave to Garcia Mendez was a Glock model 43, serial number ACVZ812, the weapon that was recovered from the roof of the Kia at the shooting scene. An ATF trace summary for that firearm confirmed that it was purchased on May 21, 2018, from Lou's Police Distributors in Hialeah by Jose Antonio Escandell.

## Debeiba Dessiree Santos

Ms. Santos indicated that on the night of the shooting, she was driving into the trailer park with her next door neighbor, Ms. Esperanza Gonzalez. She said as she drove toward her trailer lot, she saw a black car and an officer ducking up and down behind it. She said she heard gunshots and said (in Spanish) "they are shooting at the police officer." She put her vehicle in reverse and backed out of the trailer park; then she called 911.

## Esperanza Gonzalez

Ms. Gonzalez said she was on her way into the trailer park when she saw an officer (Detective Aguero) taking cover behind his vehicle. She said he was taking and returning gunfire. She said she called 911 to report that the someone was shooting at the police.

## E. Video Surveillance Footage

There was no video surveillance footage which captured the actual shooting in this case. However, the police obtained video surveillance footage which corroborates that the decedent is the person who committed the armed robbery at the El Globo Dollar Store. They also obtained footage of the deceased, Nestor Garcia Mendez and Geilyn Espinosa Acosta at the motel that Ms. Acosta described.

## F. Body Worn Camera ("BWC") Footage

Many of the Miami-Dade Police Department officers who responded to the shooting scene were equipped with body worn cameras. However, they all arrived after the shooting, so there is no BWC footage to explain exactly how/why the shooting occurred.

## **ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of the State Attorney's Office review of this matter is limited to a determination of whether a criminal violation of Florida law has occurred, and if so, whether any such violation can be proven beyond and to the exclusion of every reasonable doubt. The Office of the State Attorney does not establish police agency policy, procedures, or training requirements. Further, the State Attorney's Office does not determine whether any administrative disciplinary actions should be taken, nor whether there is civil liability in these matters.

Evidence gathered and analyzed in this case indicates that the decedent committed an armed robbery in Hialeah about four (4) hours prior to the shooting in this case. At the time of the shooting, he was in a car that he had stolen in an armed carjacking. The officers involved in this shooting were aware of the deceased's involvement in both of those criminal offenses. When Detective Aguero verified that the car he saw near the trailer park was the one involved in the carjacking, he began to follow the Kia. The driver of the Kia (Nestor Garcia Mendez) drove into the trailer park with Detective Aguero behind him. There was no high speed pursuit involved, and there is no evidence to indicate that Detective Aguero had initiated a traffic stop (ie, activated emergency lights/siren). Both Garcia Mendez and the back-seat passenger (Acosta) acknowledged that Garcia Mendez was in possession of a firearm (the one used for the El Globo robbery) at/near the time he stopped. Garcia Mendez said he did point the weapon out of the car window, which certainly could have caused Detective Aguero to fire at him and the Kia.

The evidence from the shooting scene indicates that Detective Aguero fired his weapon at the Kia and/or its occupants at least fifty (50) times during this incident. Detective Fernandez fired at least eleven (11) times from his location to the west and north of the Kia. Although three (3) witnesses interviewed indicated that they thought that Detective Aguero was being shot at during this incident, it is more likely the shots they saw/heard were from Detective Fernandez, who was firing at the Kia, rather than anyone inside the Kia. There is no evidence to indicate that anyone in the Kia fired a weapon during this incident. For example, no casings were found that were fired by the Glock model 43 that Garcia Mendez and the decedent had possessed that night; also, the Kia's occupants' gunshot residue kits did not indicate they had fired a weapon. (the decedent had only one (1) primer residue particle which is

insufficient to indicate he fired a weapon). Moreover, the man who gave the Glock model 43 to Garcia Mendez said it was unloaded when he provided it to Garcia Mendez, and there was no ammunition in the weapon when it was recovered.

In this investigation, the Office of the State Attorney must determine whether Detective Fernandez or Detective Aguero violated Florida criminal law when they shot at the Kia and its occupants. In order to make that determination, the State must consider why the detectives used deadly force in this matter, and if that reason constitutes a legal defense to any criminal charges. Florida Statute 776.012 permits the use of deadly force when a person believes such force is necessary to prevent imminent death or great bodily harm to himself or another or to prevent the commission of a forcible felony. Further, Florida Statute 776.05 permits a law enforcement officer to use any force that he believes is necessary to defend himself or another from bodily harm while making an arrest.

The only ones who can explain exactly why Detective Fernandez and Detective Aguero fired are, of course, the officers themselves. However, they have declined to provide a sworn statement in this matter. Although Garcia Mendez told the police that he did point a firearm out of the window of the Kia, there is no evidence available to determine if Detectives Aguero or Fernandez actually saw the weapon or why they felt compelled to fire at the Kia and its occupants more than sixty (60) times. The State must, therefore, evaluate the circumstantial evidence in this case to determine whether criminal charges should be filed against either officer (or both of them).

Considering that both Detective Fernandez and Detective Aguero knew the decedent had been involved in an armed robbery just four (4) hours prior to the shooting and that he had committed an armed carjacking, the officers had probable cause to arrest him for those offenses. Moreover, based on the Kia driver's admission that he pointed the Glock model 43 out the window of the vehicle when Detective Aguero stopped behind him, Detective Aguero could have reasonably perceived the occupants of the Kia as in immediate threat to his safety, to those who were in the trailer park, and to Detective Fernandez once he arrived on the scene. Upon Detective Fernandez' arrival to this location he may have had the same concerns as Detective Aguero and that may have been what caused him to fire multiple times.

Under this set of circumstances, the circumstantial evidence would support a finding that Detectives Fernandez and Aguero justifiably used deadly force in this matter. Under Florida law, a person cannot be convicted of a criminal charge based on circumstantial evidence unless the evidence is inconsistent with any reasonable hypothesis of innocence. See McArthur v. State, 351 So.2d 972 (Fla. 1977); Mayo v. State, 71 So.2d 899 (Fla. 1954); and Hodgkins v. State, 175 So.3d 741 (Fla. 2015). Because the circumstantial evidence in this case could support a finding that Detectives Fernandez and Aguero justifiably used deadly force when they shot at the Kia and its occupants, the State Attorney's Office cannot in good faith file criminal charges against them. However, without direct information from the officers themselves about why they fired at the Kia and its occupants, the State of Florida cannot make a finding that Detective Fernandez or Detective Aguero justifiably used deadly force in this matter, either.

Prepared by:

Laura Adams

**Assistant State Attorney** 

Alicia Priovolos

**Assistant State Attorney**