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Haverhill Officers Placed on Leave Following In-Custody Death

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Seven officers from the Haverhill Police Department in Massachusetts have been placed on paid administrative leave after a 43-year-old Francis Gigliotti died following a police encounter. Gigliotti, who was reportedly acting erratically, became unresponsive during the incident and was later pronounced dead at a hospital. The case has prompted an ongoing investigation and raised renewed concerns over how law enforcement handles mental health emergencies.

On the evening of July 11, police responded to calls about a man behaving unpredictably and running into traffic near a seafood restaurant in Haverhill, a city located roughly 35 miles north of Boston. The man was identified as Francis Gigliotti, a lifelong Haverhill resident. According to the Essex County District Attorney's Office, officers attempted to restrain Gigliotti outside Bradford Seafood after he tried to enter the establishment. Witness video shows multiple officers holding him face down as he cried out for help. He became unresponsive shortly afterward and later died at a nearby hospital.

According to the police incident report, detectives believe Gigliotti had smoked crack cocaine minutes before the altercation and was seen on surveillance footage engaging in what appeared to be a drug transaction earlier that day. The man suspected of selling him the drugs, identified as Joseph Hurley, was later arrested. Authorities have not confirmed whether the substances involved contributed to Gigliotti's death, pending the results of a full autopsy.

Gigliotti's fiancée, Michele Rooney, told WBTS-CD that he had been experiencing a mental health crisis and was unarmed. She described the scene as a "pile-on," with several officers reportedly kneeling on him as he screamed for help. "It's something that will be etched in my brain forever," Rooney stated during a protest held days after his death.

Mayor Melinda Barrett confirmed that none of the involved officers were wearing body cameras at the time of the incident. However, bystander footage has since circulated widely, drawing attention from civil rights advocates and lawmakers. The Essex County District Attorney's Office is leading the investigation and has urged the public to submit any additional video or photographic evidence.

Barrett expressed condolences, noting, "The City of Haverhill mourns the loss of Mr. Gigliotti… The public deserves a thorough and transparent investigation." She added that the city will continue evaluating its mental health response programs, which include an embedded behavioral health clinician and a social worker working alongside the police.

U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley, Democrat–Massachusetts, called for a full investigation, stating, "Unfortunately, we'll never be able to deliver justice for Francis Gigliotti, for in a just world, Francis would be alive today."

Law enforcement experts have long cautioned against the use of prone restraint, a method of holding individuals face down, due to the risk of positional asphyxia, a condition in which

the body's position interferes with the ability to breathe. The United States Department of Justice has warned about this technique since the mid-1990s, advising officers to reposition suspects immediately after handcuffing to avoid fatal consequences.

This incident echoes national concerns over policing practices, particularly when dealing with individuals experiencing mental health issues. As the investigation unfolds, Gigliotti's death is likely to fuel further debate about use-of-force protocols and the need for improved de-escalation strategies in law enforcement.