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Review Finds Trooper Took Appropriate Action in Fairbanks Shooting

(FAIRBANKS, Alaska) –A review regarding department policies and procedures found the trooper involved in the shooting death of 38-year-old Thom Gruenig took appropriate action and the appropriate level of force during the incident on Nov. 24, 2009. This review, finalized yesterday, was the last step of the criminal and internal investigation into Fairbanks Trooper Gary Tellep’s actions that morning.

Prior to the internal policy and procedure review, the Department of Law’s Office of Special Prosecutions and Appeals (OSPA) reviewed the thorough investigation conducted by the Alaska Bureau of Investigation (ABI). ABI is the bureau within the Division of Alaska State Troopers that investigates major crimes and all trooper-involved shootings. In February, OSPA determined that Trooper Tellep acted within the law when he shot Gruenig as Gruenig rushed at him and nearby medics with a knife that morning. The department’s review determined Trooper Tellep’s actions were appropriate under the circumstance, in accordance with department policy and likely saved his life and the lives of the medics on scene.

That morning, Trooper Tellep and University of Alaska Fire Department medics responded to a 911 call from a Hess Avenue residence. Medics staged outside the home while Trooper Tellep attempted to contact the residents. When Trooper Tellep knocked on the door, a naked Gruenig brandishing a tactical-style knife opened the door and confronted the trooper. Trooper Tellep backpedaled approximately 20 feet while Gruenig rushed at him, threatening him with the knife. Meanwhile, three medics were a short distance away. Gruenig refused to stop and continued coming at Trooper Tellep and the medics. When Trooper Tellep’s back hit a parked car, blocking further retreat, he fired his service weapon twice at Gruenig, striking him in the chest. The entire encounter happened in about 30 seconds. Trooper Tellep summoned the medics, who then began treating Gruenig. Gruenig was pronounced dead a short time later at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital.

Following up on the original 911 call, Trooper Tellep and a responding University of Alaska-Fairbanks police officer entered the residence and found Gruenig’s mother, Kathryn Gruenig, 66, of Fairbanks, lying dead next to the phone in a back room. She died of a knife wound to the throat. A marijuana grow and thousands of small nitrous oxide containers were also found inside the home. Results of an autopsy performed on Thom Gruenig showed he had drugs in his system at the time of the incident.

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