

FACEBOOK POST FROM THE POLK COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Tyler Laughter Indicted for Involuntary Manslaughter

On Monday June 12, 2023, at a regularly scheduled setting of the Grand Jury in Polk County Superior Court, the Grand Jury returned a True Bill of Indictment against Tyler Laughter for Involuntary Manslaughter for causing the death of Talia Petoia on March 10, 2023.

On the evening of March 10, 2023, Deputies, First Responders, and EMS were dispatched to a reported accidental shooting in the Sunny View community. Talia Petoia was pronounced deceased after being transported to Spartanburg Regional Hospital. Investigators with the Polk County Sheriff's Office responded to the scene of the reported shooting and began an investigation that evening. After consultation with the District Attorney's Office, the case was presented to a Magistrate who issued a warrant for Involuntary Manslaughter against Tyler Laughter for negligently discharging a firearm, causing the death of Petoia.

Further investigation, including numerous interviews, follow-up investigations, and an autopsy performed by the N.C. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner were completed in the following months. The full investigation was presented to a Grand Jury on Monday June 12, 2023, in Polk County Superior Court and the Grand Jury returned a True Bill of Indictment against Laughter for Involuntary Manslaughter. At this point the case will be heard in the Superior Court moving forward and will be prosecuted by the 42nd District Attorney's Office with the full cooperation and support of the Polk County Sheriff's Office.

In the months following the shooting incident there have been many baseless rumors and speculations circulating regarding the investigation and prosecution of this case. Sheriff Tim Wright would like to recognize the many hours of hard work that went into ensuring that this case was brought to the courts for prosecution, and to assure the public that the Polk County Sheriff's Office will continue to conduct all investigations based only on facts and evidence to ensure successful prosecution of defendants such as Tyler Laughter. In order to protect the integrity of the court case and ensure the successful prosecution of the matter, the Sheriff's Office cannot make any further public comment regarding the case until the conclusion of the criminal prosecution.

Media Requested Q&A

Why was Laughter charged before the investigation was completed?

Death investigations can take many months to be fully completed due to labs, processing, follow-up interviews and autopsy reports. It is not at all uncommon for an investigating agency to consult with their prosecutor's office on the facts and evidence at hand in the meantime to determine if they should go ahead and seek a charge from a Magistrate.

Why is Tyler Laughter out on bond?

Bonds are set by Magistrates and Judges based on recommendations from the state and local bond policies set by the Resident Superior Court Judge. The Sheriff's Office has no control over those policies and procedures.

Why was this case presented to a grand jury three months after the incident?

Again, death investigations take time to receive all required reports and conduct all necessary follow-up investigations. Also, in Polk County the grand jury is generally scheduled approximately 3-4 times a year, and the June 12, 2023, grand jury session was the first available to present this investigation.

Why wasn't the grand jury session public?

N.C. General Statute 15A-623 governs grand jury proceedings and requires that the session be held in private to allow the grand jury members the ability to deliberate without any undue influence. Prosecutors are not even allowed to be present during grand jury proceedings in North Carolina.

Why wasn't the NC SBI called in to assist in this case?

PCSO investigators have presented all of the evidence gathered including summaries of interviews, and statements made by the deceased and the defendant, to the District Attorney's Office throughout the investigation, and the District Attorney's Office has made no recommendation that they feel the NC SBI has been needed to supplement any part of the investigation. PCSO maintains a local office for NC SBI agents and continues to work closely with the NC SBI whenever needed.

Are the investigators related to the defendant?

No. Unfortunately in a small jurisdiction it is almost impossible to avoid any familial relationships coming up in some fashion in major investigations, but none of the investigators involved in this case have any relationship with the defendant and his family or the victim and her family. The lead investigator in the case is a highly experienced law enforcement officer originally from a neighboring county and has no familial ties to Polk County.

Why didn't PCSO make a public statement about this case sooner?

PCSO no longer employs a full-time public information officer and based on the speculation and rumors that were being broadcast publicly about the investigation, the county attorney as well as the District Attorney's Office recommended not making any special public comments that could cause any public bias or issues should this case proceed to trial. There have been many recent examples in North Carolina and nationwide of public figures making public comments

about pending criminal cases leading to censures, changes in venue, and sometimes dismissals and acquittals, and PCSO's number one priority is to see all criminal cases brought by our investigators successfully prosecuted.

Has anyone spoken to the family of Talia Petoia?

Sheriff Wright recognizes and sympathizes with the grief and loss Ms. Petoia's family is going through and has personally offered to meet with the immediate family. PCSO's general counsel has also spoken directly with the attorney for Ms. Petoia's estate on several occasions and assured them that PCSO will provide any information needed to complete the estate process so long as it does not compromise the successful prosecution of the criminal case against Tyler Laughter. The District Attorney's Office has also met with Ms. Petoia's family and their attorney.

What is involuntary manslaughter?

The N.C. pattern jury instructions define involuntary manslaughter as the unintentional killing of a human being by an unlawful act not amounting to a felony or by an act done in a criminally negligent way.

What is the difference between District Court and Superior Court and when will this case be heard?

District Court is a lower level of trial court that hears misdemeanor cases and low-level felony pleas and probable cause hearings. Superior Court is the appropriate court for serious felonies and all crimes that may require a jury trial. This case is currently set for the administrative term of Superior Court on July 28, 2023. Superior Court administrative terms are for addressing attorney status, motions, pleas, and for evidentiary hearings prior to setting a case for trial.