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Cop who left scene of deadly St. Paul shooting facing discipline

Herón Márquez Estrada and Curt Brown, Star Tribune

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St. Paul Police Chief William Finney said Monday that he probably will discipline an off-duty officer accused of leaving a University Avenue bar moments after a man was shot to death.

"I am not a happy chief. To do nothing is not an option for me," Finney said during a news conference called to discuss the officer's conduct following the shooting death of Stephen Kuma at Arnellia's bar early Friday morning. Discipline could range from an oral reprimand to termination. Citing data privacy laws, Finney refused to identify the officer. But he has been identified by patrons and bar owner Arnellia Allen as Cornelius Benner IV.

Benner, a 10-year veteran who sometimes works off duty at the bar, has a relatively clean internal-affairs record. He has been given three oral reprimands and one written reprimand for off-duty work.

One included an infraction for working at Arnellia's without permission in 2002.

Finney said policy is that officers remain at the scene of a serious crime even if they aren't on duty. At the very least, he said, the officer could have given a description of the shooter to investigators.

"It's my expectation that officers at the scene of a serious situation will act professionally," Finney said. "They should render aid to any victim."

On Monday, in a statement released on Benner's behalf by the St. Paul Police Federation, the officer said he heard gunfire but didn't see anyone get shot.

Benner, who admits he was drinking, said he was afraid for his safety and left the bar because he had no gun, no badge and no bullet-proof vest. He

said he left after confirming that 911 had been called.

"If a person is fearing for his safety you can't require him to do anything," Federation President David Titus said Monday afternoon.

Benner had his back to the door when he heard gunshots, according to the statement. He fell to the floor as the gunman sprayed the bar.

Benner is the son of retired Sgt. Cornelius (Butch) Benner, who was Finney's first partner on the force.

Finney said he could not discuss specifics of the incident at Arnellia's, including reports that the officer was about two yards from Kuma when he was shot and that he stepped over or around Kuma as he left.

Finney would not say whether Benner is still working or whether he is on administrative leave. The chief did not offer a time line for the conclusion of the investigation either.

The shooting was captured on video cameras, which the city had the bar install because of a high number of police calls. The most serious incident before last week's killing was in 1999 when a 28-year-old man died after being run over by a 23-year-old Minneapolis man outside the bar.

Allen said Benner came in to talk to her about 10:30 p.m. Friday because she wanted his advice on hiring off-duty officers. "I didn't see him right at the moment of the shooting," she said. "I didn't see him after the shooting."

Homicide investigators tracked down Benner at his home about 5 a.m. Friday and ordered him to return to police headquarters to provide a statement, the federation said.

Kuma's relatives, friends, neighbors and co-workers were angry Monday.

"Why would a police officer walk over a body like that?" said Ikeco Powell, a friend of Kuma's. "Now they'll probably place him on paid leave, which is just like a vacation."

Glenn Timti said his uncle, who would have turned 46 on Saturday, seldom

drank alcohol and stopped at Arnellia's to meet a friend. He said Kuma was one of the older brothers in a family of seven siblings from the West African nation of Cameroon. He emigrated to Minnesota about nine years ago and his job helping developmentally disabled people reflected his altruistic nature.

"He did everything he could for humanity and treated everyone as brothers no matter their race or background," Timti said. "He never wanted anything to do with violence."

Bill Stich, program director at the Ramsey County-owned Lake Owasso Residence, said Kuma handled the day-to-day needs of the residents for the last two years.

"He was very personable, pleasant, upbeat and well liked by the clients," Stich said.

Charles Mitchell, a neighbor of Kuma's in an East Side apartment building, said "His heart was bigger than big . . . this is all so senseless."

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