Dog Attacks Fatality Report

This investigation, “Mauled: When police dogs bite,” was published in partnership with The Marshall Project, a nonprofit news organization covering the U.S. criminal justice system, IndyStar, AL.com and the Invisible Institute.

The tiny pink house was pretty much empty. And run-down and dark, since the electricity had been shut off. Nevertheless, someone was trying to burglarize it, a caller told 911 well after midnight on a Sunday in Montgomery, Alabama.

The police called in a K-9 handler and his dog, Niko, to search 3809 Cresta Circle. The dog lunged, found a man and bit down, according to court records. It took almost two minutes for the handler to pull the dog off. And before long, their suspect, a 51-year-old Black man, bled to death. The dog had torn an artery in his groin.

The man was Joseph Lee Pettaway, and his family says he was no burglar. He got in trouble for bad checks and served time years ago, but was now taking care of his 87-year-old mother, Lizzie Mae, and helping to repair the pink house in her neighborhood. He had a key and permission to sleep there, they said.

The family is suing the city, seeking damages and information about what happened. “I never thought a dog would end up killing anybody, especially a trained dog,” said Walter Pettaway, Joe’s brother. The family also wants public release of the police bodycam video from July 8, 2018, that is described in court documents.