



KEN PAXTON

ATTORNEY GENERAL *of* TEXAS

CUSTODIAL DEATH REPORT

Agency Information

CDR Number: 26-476-UF

Version Type: ORIGINAL
VERSION

Report Date: 6/18/2026 11:29
AM

Status: Submitted

Agency/Facility Information

Agency Name: Austin County
Sheriff's Office

Agency Address: 417 N. Chesley St..

Agency City: Bellville

Agency State: TX

Agency Zip: 77418

Director Information

Director Salutation: Sheriff

Director First Name: Jack

Director Middle Name:

Director Last Name: Brandes

Reporter Name: Donald Darracq

Reporter Email: donaldd@austincountyso.org

Decedent Information

Identity of Deceased

First Name: Justin

Middle Name: Joseph

Last Name: Howard

Suffix:

Date of Birth: 11/1/1985

Sex: Male

Race: Black or African
American

Age At Time Of Death: 40

Date/Time of Custody (arrest, incarceration) (mm/dd/yyyy hh:mm AM/PM):

Date/Time of Custody or
Incident: 5/20/2026 8:43 AM

Date/Time of Death (mm/dd/yyyy hh:mm AM/PM):

Death Date and Time: 5/20/2026 10:56
AM

Manner / Cause of Death

Has a medical examiner or coroner conducted an evaluation to determine a cause of death?

Medical Examiner/Coroner
Evaluation?: No, evaluation not
planned

What was the manner of death? (select only one)

Manner of Death: Other - specify

Manner of Death Description:

Firearm

Medical Cause of Death:

Medical Cause of Death:

N/A

Had the decedent been receiving treatment for the medical condition that caused the death after admission to your jail's jurisdiction?

Medical Treatment: Not Applicable

If death was an accident, homicide or suicide, who caused the death?

Who caused the death?: Law
enforcement/correctional
personnel

If a weapon caused the death, what type of weapon caused the death? (Hold CTRL to select all that apply)

Type of weapon that caused
death?: Rifle/shotgun

Was the cause of death the result of a pre-existing medical condition or did the decedent develop the condition after admission?

Pre existing medical
condition?: Not Applicable;
cause of death was
accidental injury,
intoxication, suicide
or homicide

If death was an accident, homicide or suicide, what was the means of death?

Means of Death: Firearm

Location / Custody Information

Where did the event causing the death occur?

Street Address: 29.9275806,
-96.9421054

City: Plum
(unincorporated)

County: Fayette

Zip: 78952

What location category best describes where the event causing the death occurred?

Location Category: Field/woods/lake/waterway/beach

What type of custody/facility was the Decedent in at the time of death:

Type of Custody: Pre-Custodial Use
of Force

Specific type of custody/facility:

Specific Type of Custody/Facility:

Custody of Law Enforcement Personnel during/fleeing arrest

What was the time and date of the deceased's entry into the law enforcement facility where the death occurred (mm/dd/yyyy hh:mm AM/PM):

Entry Date Time:

Entry Date Time N/A: ☒

Where did the death occur?

Death Location: Scene of incident

General Information

Did any other law enforcement agencies respond to calls for service related to this incident?

Other Agencies Respond?: Yes

What were the most serious offense(s) with which the deceased was (or would have been) charged with at the time of death?

Offense 1:

Aggravated kidnapping - deadly weapon

Offense 2:

Offense 3:

Were the Charges:: Not filed at time of death

What were the types of charges or reason for contact? (Hold CTRL to select all that apply)

Type of Offense: Violent Crime
Against Persons

At any time during the incident and/or entry into the law enforcement facility, did the decedent display or use a weapon?

Decedent display/use of weapons: Yes, mark all that apply

Decedent Display or Use Weapon Details: Displayed firearm without discharge

At any time during the incident and/or entry into the law enforcement facility, did the decedent:

Attempt to Injure Others?: Yes (select all that apply)

Ways Decedent Attempted To Injure Others: Injured civilian(s) or other inmate(s)

At any time during the incident and/or entry into the law enforcement facility, did the decedent:

Appear intoxicated (alcohol or drugs):	No	Make suicidal statements?:	No
Exhibit any mental health problems?:	No	Exhibit any medical problems?:	No

At any time during the incident and/or entry into the law enforcement facility, did the decedent:

Barricade self or initiate standoff?:	Yes	Resist being handcuffed or arrested?:	Yes
Physically attempt/assault officer(s):	Unknown	Gain possession of officer's weapon:	No
Verbally threaten other(s) including law:	Unknown	Escape or attempt to escape/flee custody:	Yes
Attempt gain possession officer's weapon:	No		

Was the deceased under restraint in the time leading up to the death or the events causing the death?

Under Restraint: No

Summary of Incident

Summary of How the Death Occurred: (max. 30,000 characters)

Summary:

BACKGROUND-

On May 19, 2026, the suspect (decedent), along with the victim (hostage), who the suspect had previously abducted, arrived at a local residence. The hostage was reportedly "covered in blood". The resident attempted to hold the suspect and victim at gunpoint, waiting for the police, but the suspect used the victim as a shield, ultimately stealing the resident's pickup truck with a box trailer attached. Local police located the truck and trailer on the morning of May 20, 2026.

On May 20, 2026, at approximately 08:30, the Austin County Sheriff's Office, Regional Special Response Team (SRT) was officially requested to assist with this ongoing situation.

On May 20, 2026, at approximately 9:45, components of the SRT, to include: command, tactical, HNT, technical support, armor, and medical, arrived at the location.

The location was found to be an unincorporated, agricultural section of the county, appearing to be a large, open hay field. The vehicle (stolen earlier) was approximately 500 yards from the paved roadway, in the hay field. Due to the heavy rain earlier, it was assumed the vehicle was stuck in the mud.

Lacking other options, SRT armor, along with two additional police vehicles, made a direct approach, all equipped with emergency lights. The SRT armored vehicle bogged down in the mud approximately forty feet from the target vehicle. Emergency lighting and sirens were activated to announce our presence, and HNT immediately began hailing the vehicle using the PA system. The two remaining police vehicles took positions to the rear and front of the target vehicle.

After multiple attempts to gain compliance through commands over the PA, the decision was made to use "less-than-lethal" bean-bag rounds to breach the rear window of the target vehicle in an attempt to increase visibility into the vehicle; however, due to the distance, the rounds were ineffective but the turret over-watch officer was able to discern a silver colored handgun being waived around inside of the target vehicle.

With the knowledge that the suspect had a weapon, the fact that he had an open warrant for assault against the victim (hostage), and his reluctance to communicate in any way with negotiators, the tactical component advanced and staged for a hostage rescue.

Due to the heavily tinted rear window of the target vehicle, a 40mm wooden baton was used to break the window. In addition, 40mm OC "ferret" rounds (chemical agent) were deployed to both breach the rear window and disperse the chemical agent in an attempt to cause the occupants to exit the vehicle. HNT personnel continued hailing the vehicle.

The only response from the target vehicle was to roll down the back passenger window and then abruptly roll it back up.

Shortly thereafter, technical support (drone) personnel advised that the driver's side door of the target vehicle was open and the suspect was dragging the hostage from the vehicle. SRT tactical elements then observed two individuals exiting the target vehicle and immediately gave orders to put their hands in the air. The victim (hostage) complied, but the suspect did not.

FACTS KNOWN:

The suspect was a wanted felon from another county for family violence (assault by strangulation against the victim/hostage). The suspect kidnapped the victim the day prior; the suspect was most likely armed with a handgun, and all commands by law enforcement to surrender had been ignored, escalating the danger of the situation by actively using the victim as a hostage.

Due to all facts known, SRT tactical members fired one shot at the suspect, believing the victim/hostage was in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death. The suspect was observed grasping the victim/hostage with his right arm and moving his left arm, which was obscured from the view of the SRT tactical team members. Knowing the suspect had a firearm, SRT tactical members feared he would use the firearm to kill the victim/hostage or fire at the weapon at them.

To protect the victim/hostage as well as themselves against the potential use of deadly force, additional shots were fired.

The victim/hostage was removed to safety and received medical services.

SRT tactical members approached the suspect to detain him and perform lifesaving measures.

A silver colored hand gun was retrieved from the suspect's waistband.

The suspect succumbed.

The Texas Rangers were notified