

San Francisco Police Department
Police Chief Bill Scott



Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
David Serrano Sewell, Executive Director

February 14, 2025

Kevin J. Rooney
Law Office of Kevin J. Rooney, P.C.
3425 Brookside Road, Suite A
Stockton, CA 95219
kevin@kevinrooneylaw.com

Joseph M. Goethals
Goethals & Stone, PC
1131 Howard Avenue
Burlingame, CA 94010
joe@gostlaw.com

**Subject: Death of Mr. Suchir Balaji
(SFPD Case #240-735-063; OCME Case Number 2024-1459)**

Dear Mr. Rooney and Mr. Goethals:

The following serves as a joint response on behalf of the San Francisco Police Department ("SFPD") and Office of the Chief Medical Examiner ("OCME") (collectively, "the City") to the letter from Philip J. Kearney (the attorney retained by Suchir Balaji's family) dated December 19, 2024 regarding the death of Mr. Suchir Balaji. By his letter Mr. Kearney requested, on behalf of Mr. Balaji's parents, an "immediate criminal investigation" into Mr. Balaji's death pursuant to SFPD General Order 6.05.

The SFPD and OCME have thoroughly reviewed this matter. For the reasons outlined below, the OCME found no evidence or information to establish a cause and manner of death for Mr. Balaji other than a suicide by self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. For your reference, the OCME Report is attached (Case Number: 2024-1459). SFPD conducted an independent investigation and based on the information SFPD reviewed, there is insufficient evidence to find Mr. Balaji's death was the result of a homicide.

Additionally, this responds to your electronic communication to the Office of the Medical Examiner on January 14, 2024, by which you introduce yourself and Mr. Joseph Goethals as the representative for Mr. Balaji's parents and requested the OCME certified forensic report related to the case and any "body worn camera or recording device." As indicated, the OCME Report is attached. Please note OCME investigators do not wear recording devices on their person; as such, there are no such records held by OCME.

OCME Review of the Circumstances

Emergency Services and, subsequently OCME investigators, were dispatched to Mr. Balaji's residence on November 26, 2024, where he was found with an apparent gunshot wound to the head. He was found by OCME investigators lying supine on the bathroom floor, with what was confirmed, upon examination performed at the OCME by the forensic pathologist, to be a bullet wound to the head resulting from a front-to-back downward trajectory. There were no signs of unrelated injuries or bruising to Mr. Balaji.

Mr. Balaji was found alone inside his fourth-floor residence. Based on the examination of the apartment, there were no signs of forced entry to the single door leading into the residence, and the door was found with the deadbolt engaged (locked position).

The living room unit windows face the shared courtyard multiple stories below and the bedroom windows face Hermann Street. Additionally, all the windows are affixed with a stop mechanism that restricts their movement and limits their opening to approximately four inches. As such, the windows are not accessible points of entry. There are no other accessible features to the unit such as a fire escape, patio or deck. There is no indication from video or key fob records that anyone else entered the residence through the door, and there is no reported evidence of forced entry or disturbance to the apartment. These facts, taken together, support that Mr. Balaji was alone at the time of the incident.

The circumstances and evidence also suggest that Mr. Balaji was standing directly in front of, and in close proximity to the mirror when the firearm was discharged (i.e., based on the size and layout of the bathroom, the position of Mr. Balaji's body as observed by OCME investigators, the blood trajectory and location of the bullet entry).

The pistol found at the scene was purchased and registered to Mr. Balaji in January 2024. A review of the desktop computer revealed searches for brain anatomy. And a witness statement from Mr. Balaji's mother indicated that he had been under stress due to quitting his job.

After OCME investigators completed their on-scene investigation and found no circumstances to deem the scene suspicious based on the totality of the circumstances, OCME investigators transferred Mr. Balaji to the OCME for further examination and post-mortem toxicology analysis.

OCME Review and Certification

As background, the OCME is a civilian-run organization within the City Administrator's Office. Our responsibilities include certifying the cause of death (the disease or condition leading to death) and the manner of death (undetermined, natural, accident, suicide, or homicide), as delegated to each county's coroner or medical examiner under California Government Code Section 27491. It is important to note that the OCME's medicolegal investigations and certifications do not serve the purpose of either law enforcement investigation or criminal prosecution; those roles are delegated to SFPD and the San Francisco District Attorney, respectively. Moreover, the OCME classification of the manner of death is not a determination regarding any criminal investigation or act. OCME follows the best practice guidelines established by the National Association of Medical Examiners ("NAME") regarding the manner of death classification, including when classifying a death as a suicide. These may not be the same standards and practices applied in decisions about criminal investigation and prosecution by law enforcement agencies.

On November 27, 2024, the OCME forensic pathologist performed an examination of the decedent, reviewed CT imaging, and reviewed information provided by the OCME investigator.

As part of its standard investigation, OCME's accredited Forensic Laboratory Division performed postmortem toxicology testing, which established the presence of ethanol and amphetamine in the decedent's blood. OCME investigators also collected a Gunshot Residue collection kit at the scene.

As discussed below, the OCME released the Gunshot Residue Kit and Mr. Balaji's pistol to the SFPD for analysis. The findings of the SFPD testing support the OCME's certification of the manner of death as "suicide" and the cause of death as "gunshot wound to the head." The OCME's certification of the manner of death is based on established forensic pathology principles and is consistent with NAME guidelines, and, in this case we note that there was no credible evidence of any other manner of death (e.g. natural, accident, homicide, or undetermined).

Finally, the Chief Medical Examiner has reviewed the case file as well as the additional information listed below and concurs with the determination. For these reasons, OCME considers this case into the cause and manner of death as complete.

Mr. Kearney indicates in his letter that Mr. Balaji's family employed a forensic pathologist (Dr. Joseph Cohen) to conduct a private autopsy. While we have only seen a preliminary report provided by previous counsel (attached to Mr. Kearney's letter), the findings are consistent with the findings in the OCME report, e.g. same entrance and trajectory.

SFPD Investigative Findings

The SFPD reviewed the OCME's findings, examined the death scene, and undertook these additional investigative measures:

- 1) On 11/26/2024, responding patrol officers spoke with Mr. Balaji's neighbor and Property Manager. The Property Manager reported efforts made by Mr. Balaji's mother and the Fire Department to conduct a well-being check on Mr. Balaji. The Property Manager provided the Fire Department personnel with keys to enter Mr. Balaji's apartment.
- 2) Reviewed Body Worn Camera ("BWC") video footage. The BWC shows an officer entering Mr. Balaji's apartment after the Fire Department gained entry. The officer is seen inspecting the apartment for any signs of foul play, observing the firearm under Mr. Balaji's leg, and discovering a firearm case and documents showing Mr. Balaji as the owner of the firearm observed.
- 3) Retrieved and reviewed video footage from the property manager and a printout of Mr. Balaji's key FOB. This video shows Mr. Balaji exiting the elevator and walking outside. Shortly thereafter Mr. Balaji is seen returning with what appears to be food.
- 4) Reviewed Records from the Department of Emergency Management. As part of the investigation, SFPD reviewed and analyzed the initial call information for any relevant information into the possible death of Mr. Balaji. SFPD found no information that merit any additional follow up or shed any light on what may have caused Mr. Balaji's death.
- 5) Consulted with a crime scene blood analysis expert. Retired SFPD Homicide Inspector Michael Gaynor provided his expert opinion that Mr. Balaji death appeared to be a suicide.
- 6) Submitted biological evidence to the SFPD Crime Lab for biological screening and comparison. The SFPD Crime Lab confirmed Mr. Balaji's DNA was found on the firearm. The

ballistic test confirmed the firearm was the exact same firearm that caused Mr. Balaji's death.

- 7) Reviewed a copy of a missing person's report for Mr. Balaji, filed with the Union City Police Department Incident Report (241-126-004). This report did not merit any additional follow up or shed any light on what may have caused Mr. Balaji's death.
- 8) Gunshot Residue Kit. SFPD examined the kit, and characteristic gunshot residue particles were detected on both Mr. Balaji's right hand and the left hand. A report confirming these findings was issued on January 7, 2025.

The SFPD found no evidence or information to establish that Mr. Balaji died of means other than a suicide by self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

If you learn of any new information or evidence, please provide it to SFPD. SFPD considers this case closed and will only reopen the criminal investigation if there is a basis for a chargeable offense and the statute of limitations has not expired.

Closing

As you have identified yourself and Mr. Goethals as the parents' current legal representatives, we have omitted Mr. Kearney based on the mother's statement that he no longer represents the family. If this is not accurate please let us know. And we respectfully ask that one of you provide this response and attached report to the family directly. We would also like to direct you to work directly with Lt. Ozol, Legal Division – BWC Unit to coordinate the retrieval of the body worn camera footage and any other information you seek. He can be reached at (415) 837-7150 or by email at: Jonathan.T.Ozol@sfgov.org.

We realize that this information is difficult to receive, and we extend our sincere condolences to the Balaji family. We hope that this response may help bring some amount of closure to his grieving parents, friends and family.

Sincerely,



San Francisco Police Chief Bill Scott



David Serrano Sewell, Executive Director, OCME

Attachments: OCME Forensic Report

Cc: Carmen Chu, City Administrator
Jennifer Johnston, Deputy City Administrator
Glenn Levy, Deputy City Attorney, Office of the City Attorney