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For Immediate Release

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Former Sheriff's Deputy Pleads Guilty to Voluntary Manslaughter for Shooting a Man Fleeing from Custody

Former San Diego County Sheriff's Deputy Aaron Russell, 25, pleaded guilty today to one felony count of voluntary manslaughter in connection with the shooting death of a man he saw escape from a patrol car near the downtown San Diego jail in May of 2020. Russell also admitted he personally used a fire-arm in the commission of the crime. Russell shot Nicholas Bills, 36, in the back and the side as he ran near Front and B Streets. The incident was caught on a Smart Streetlight surveillance camera near the intersection.

Russell is scheduled to be sentenced by Superior Court Judge Francis Devaney on February 7. He faces up to 11 years in state prison.

"As in every case, my office follows the law and the evidence in pursuing a fair and equal justice for all," said District Attorney Summer Stephan. "After an extensive analysis of all the evidence, including that presented by the defense after the preliminary hearing, the defendant's guilty plea to felony voluntary manslaughter accurately reflects that this is a homicide in which the victim was unlawfully killed, and that the former deputy sheriff erroneously and unreasonably believed it was necessary to defend against a perceived imminent threat. The District Attorney's Office has met with the victim's mother regarding this settlement. Her input was a critical component in determining the appropriate resolution as she has suffered an unspeakable loss because of the defendant's actions. Nothing will bring back this family's loved one, but we hope this conviction will bring them a measure of justice and accountability."

Nicholas Bills was being transported to jail in a State Parks patrol car when he slipped his left hand out of a handcuff and burst out of the vehicle. A nearby State Parks officer opened the door of his pickup and tried to get out to stop Bills, but Bills shoved the door against the officer and took off running, handcuffs still on Bills' right wrist. The officer from the pickup ran after Bills. Russell, who was then a Sheriff's Deputy, was standing at the intersection in uniform and observed the attempted escape. As Bills ran with a handcuff around his right wrist, Russell fired five shots, striking Bills four times.

During a preliminary hearing, a fellow Sheriff's Deputy who had also witnessed the attempted escape, testified that he planned to chase and tackle Bills. He testified he saw no need for any type of other force and did not feel anyone in the area was in immediate danger. Following a preliminary hearing, Russell was ordered to face trial on a charge of second-degree murder.

Russell's attorneys raised several theories of justification for the use of the force, but in the plea agreement entered into the public record today, Russell admitted that he "unreasonably believed that I or

someone else was in imminent danger of being killed or suffering great bodily injury. I actually, but unreasonably believed that the immediate use of deadly force was necessary to defend against the danger. I, therefore, acting alone, personally used my department-issued firearm to shoot Nicholas Bils, ending his life.”

In January 2020, California law changed to make use of deadly force permissible only when “necessary,” when a life is in imminent danger and nonlethal methods are not available. Previously, deadly force had been allowable when “reasonable.” Russell is the first law enforcement officer in California to be charged with murder since the state raised the standard for when peace officers can use deadly force.

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About the San Diego County District Attorney's Office

The San Diego County DA's Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.