

Opinion Police officer deaths by suicide should be considered line of duty

By the [Editorial Board](#)

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In a rare ruling — one believed to be a first for the D.C. police department — the death of [Officer Jeffrey L. Smith](#), who died by suicide in the aftermath of the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol, has been classified as a line-of-duty death. This gives overdue recognition to the toll that police work takes on those who do it and hopefully begins a meaningful discussion about how police departments can best confront the problem of officer suicides.

[The D.C. Police and Firefighters Retirement and Relief Board](#) notified Erin O. Smith, the widow of the 35-year-old police officer who shot himself nine days after he helped quell the mob of Trump supporters who besieged the Capitol, of its decision last week. Ms. Smith never wavered in her belief that, if not for the events of Jan. 6, 2021, her husband would be alive today. Not only did she have to navigate the red tape thrown up by skeptical officials, but she had to contend with the macho culture traditionally associated with police work, which has deepened the stigma too long associated with suicide.

On Jan. 6, 2021, Officer Smith was dispatched to assist Capitol Police who were being overwhelmed by supporters of President Donald Trump aiming to upend Congress's certification of the 2020 election. Smith was hit on the head with a metal pole but kept working. After a week — with seemingly cursory medical follow-up, he was ordered back to work. He shot himself on the day he was supposed to be back on duty. Jeffrey Smith had no history of depression or mental health issues before Jan. 6. The injury he suffered on Jan. 6, the retirement board ruled, “was the sole and direct cause of his death.”

Ms. Smith will now receive an early annuity equal to 100 percent of her husband's salary, as opposed to the 33 percent she would otherwise have received. But her battle is not over. She wants her husband's name added to the D.C. police department's list of fallen officers and engraved on the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, and the official burial honors traditionally afforded to officers killed in the line of duty. That she has yet, according to her attorney, to hear directly from D.C. Police Chief Robert J. Contee III or Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) is troubling. Even more troubling is that the men who allegedly attacked Jeffrey Smith, reportedly identified with the help of a group of cybersleuths who plowed through thousands of hours of videotape, have yet to be charged. And not to be forgotten is Howard Liebengood, a veteran Capitol Police officer who died by suicide days after being called to duty on Jan. 6 and whose family is awaiting word on their petition that his death be classified as in the line of duty.

Suicide is a leading cause of death of police officers. Ms. Smith has said she hopes her husband's sacrifice will help others. The death of Officer Smith is a wake-up call that needs to be heeded.

If you or someone you know needs help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255). You can also text a crisis counselor by messaging the Crisis Text Line at 741741.