

**ATTORNEY GENERAL OFFICE’S REPORT REGARDING THE
DECEMBER 12, 2020 STABBING DEATH OF JAKE SEABURG IN JAFFREY,
NEW HAMPSHIRE**

I. INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Attorney General and the New Hampshire State Police have concluded an investigation into the fatal stabbing of Jake Seaburg (age 23) in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, on the morning of December 12, 2020. The investigation determined that Mr. Seaburg was fatally stabbed during a physical altercation with Reilly Lawn (age 23). Reilly Lawn has made statements asserting claims of accident and self-defense. The purpose of this report is to summarize the Attorney General Office’s findings and conclusions with regard to Mr. Seaburg’s death. The findings and conclusions set forth in this report are based upon information gathered during the course of the investigation, including interviews with Reilly Lawn as well as every eyewitness who saw his fatal altercation with Mr. Seaburg.

Under New Hampshire law, when there is some evidence of the defense of accident or self-defense, the State must disprove the defense beyond a reasonable doubt. Based upon the investigation conducted into Jake Seaburg’s stabbing death, New Hampshire Deputy Attorney General Jane E. Young has determined that there is insufficient evidence to disprove the asserted claim of accident beyond a reasonable doubt. As a result, no homicide charges will be brought against Reilly Lawn.

II. SUMMARY OF THE FACTS

At about 5:00 a.m. on the morning of December 12, Reilly Lawn was inside his apartment in Jaffrey with his two roommates, their friend Jake Seaburg, and another guest. Everyone had been drinking alcohol during the night, and had been “hanging out”

inside the apartment for over an hour. At one point, and as part of casual conversation, Reilly Lawn brought out and showed others some knives that he owned.

Later on, while the group was gathered at a table inside the kitchen of the apartment. Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg began to argue. Their verbal argument escalated quickly, to everyone else's surprise. During that dispute, Mr. Seaburg got up from his chair and approached Reilly Lawn. Reilly Lawn grabbed one of the knives that he had shown others earlier, intending to use it to keep Mr. Seaburg away. Mr. Seaburg then threw Reilly Lawn to the floor, maintaining his hold on him as he did so. Mr. Seaburg landed on top of Reilly Lawn, their bodies facing one-another. In statements Reilly Lawn later made to police, he believed that Mr. Seaburg was stabbed "accidentally" when he (Mr. Seaburg) landed atop of Lawn while violently taking him down. Reilly Lawn also admitted that, while Mr. Seaburg was still on him and punching him, he tried to stab Mr. Seaburg in "self-defense." Of the three other people in the room who witnessed the violent encounter between Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg, none of them actually saw Lawn stab Mr. Seaburg.

Mr. Seaburg was quickly pulled off of Reilly Lawn. Reilly Lawn then placed the knife used in the stabbing in the kitchen, called 911, and reported in substance that he had stabbed someone. Reilly Lawn waited outside the apartment, where police encountered him. Despite aid rendered by his friends and by medical personnel, Jake Seaburg died soon after the police arrived. He suffered two stab wounds to his chest.

Because the incident was a homicide investigation,¹ the New Hampshire State Police assumed the primary investigative role, with the assistance of the Attorney General's Office. The investigation included documenting the inside of the residence where the fatal stabbing occurred and collecting physical evidence at the scene of the incident. Additionally, investigators interviewed Reilly Lawn – once shortly after the stabbing incident, and again two days later. Investigators also interviewed the other three people in the apartment, each of who saw the altercation between Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg. Investigators also interviewed other people who had interacted with Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg that morning and the previous evening.

III. THE INVESTIGATION

A. Background Relationships

Reilly Lawn lived in an apartment on Peterborough Road in Jaffrey with Nicholas Panagiotes, the leaseholder, and Trevor Demmons, two of the eyewitnesses to the eventual fatal altercation. Mr. Panagiotes was friends with Reilly Lawn; Mr. Demmons, who had been living at the apartment for only a couple of weeks, “barely knew” Reilly Lawn.

Jake Seaburg was friends with Mr. Panagiotes and Mr. Demmons. Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg did not know one-another before the evening of December 11, 2020, when Mr. Seaburg stopped by the apartment. The third eyewitness to the altercation, Ashlynn Waller, was friends with Mr. Demmons, and had also never met Reilly Lawn prior to the morning of that event.

¹ By “homicide investigation,” this report relies upon the medical conclusion made by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner as to Jake Seaburg’s manner of death. See infra. That medical determination does not affect the legal determination of culpability addressed later in this report.

B. Events Leading up to the Altercation Between Reilly Lawn and Jake Seaburg

At about 11:30 p.m. on December 11, after finishing up a work shift, Reilly Lawn returned home to the apartment that he shared with Mr. Panagiotes and Mr. Demmons. There, he saw his roommates and Mr. Seaburg, who he met for the first time. Thereafter, Mr. Seaburg left with Mr. Demmons to attend a party in nearby Troy, New Hampshire. Mr. Panagiotes went to bed.

Early the next morning, Mr. Seaburg and Mr. Demmons, as well as Ms. Waller, returned to the apartment. Reilly Lawn was up, and Mr. Panagiotes woke up. Those five people had been drinking alcohol up to that point, and everyone continued to drink alcohol at the apartment, where they mainly congregated in the kitchen. That is where the verbal and physical altercations between Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg transpired. At one point during casual conversation, Reilly Lawn showed others a pair of knives that he used for slaughtering livestock. Reilly Lawn left those knives on the kitchen table. Later, while everyone (Reilly Lawn, Mr. Seaburg, Mr. Panagiotes, Mr. Demmons, and Ms. Waller) was at the kitchen table, a verbal argument ensued between Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg over COVID-19 fatalities.

C. The Altercation: Witness Interviews

1. Reilly Lawn

Investigators first interviewed Reilly Lawn about his fatal encounter with Jake Seaburg several hours after it occurred. In that interview, Reilly Lawn did not know that Mr. Seaburg had died. Investigators conducted a follow-up interview with Reilly Lawn two days later, on December 14. Reilly Lawn agreed to speak with investigators both

times, and answered all questions posed to him. The accounts provided by Reilly Lawn were consistent in pertinent respects.²

According to Reilly Lawn, he was sitting at the kitchen table when the argument between he and Mr. Seaburg, who was seated adjacent to him, started.³ Mr. Seaburg became increasingly upset, yelling that Reilly Lawn could not tell him to leave the apartment and that he would “kill him” and “kick his ass.”⁴ Just before or as Mr. Seaburg stood up,⁵ Reilly Lawn grabbed one of the knives that he had shown to others earlier. He explained that he did so because he felt threatened by Mr. Seaburg and believed that brandishing the knife would be enough to ward him off. Reilly Lawn further recounted that when Mr. Seaburg then walked over to him, he stood up, still holding the knife, at waist level with the blade pointed outward and perpendicular to his body.

Mr. Seaburg then punched Reilly Lawn in the face, and the next thing that he remembered he was lying face-up on the kitchen floor. Reilly Lawn described that when he hit the floor, Mr. Seaburg fell on top of him, full-force and facing him. Reilly Lawn explained that he did not try to stab Mr. Seaburg at that point, but believed that the

² In addition to these formal interviews, local police officers briefly spoke with Reilly Lawn upon encountering him while responding to the 911 call. Although abbreviated, the account that he gave officers was substantively similar to what he later recounted in his interviews.

³ Reilly Lawn reported that although he and Mr. Seaburg had not argued before, he sensed some tension in their interaction. He specifically pointed to a trip to a local convenience store, where he claimed that Mr. Seaburg had acted obnoxiously to the clerk who would not sell them alcohol.

⁴ None of the eyewitnesses to the argument and altercation between Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg reported hearing Mr. Seaburg threaten Reilly Lawn’s life.

⁵ Reilly Lawn repeated on numerous occasions in his interview that it was difficult to remember exactly when events occurred because the physical altercation happened so quickly. The eyewitnesses had similar difficulties recounting sequence of events pertaining to the fight. That the altercation was wholly unexpected and occurred rapidly, as well as admitted alcohol consumption by everyone, may have played a role in people’s inability to recall and relate precise details.

collision of Mr. Seaburg's body on the floor with him resulted in him "accidentally" stabbing Mr. Seaburg.

Reilly Lawn further described that his hands initially were pinned against his body and under Mr. Seaburg's body while Mr. Seaburg was on top of him, but became free while Mr. Seaburg was punching him and leveraging his own body further up Lawn's torso. Reilly Lawn claimed that at that time, he tried to stab Mr. Seaburg, and swung the knife that he still held towards Mr. Seaburg's waist. Reilly Lawn explained that he attempted to stab Mr. Seaburg then because he wanted Mr. Seaburg to stop punching him. Reilly Lawn stated that he assumed that he had stabbed Mr. Seaburg, but never at any point while on the floor felt any resistance to the knife blade that would suggest that Mr. Seaburg actually had been stabbed; nor did Mr. Seaburg make any noises or movements indicating that he actually had been stabbed.

Reilly Lawn recounted that after he tried to stab Mr. Seaburg, Mr. Seaburg rolled off of him, stood up, and then immediately fell to the ground. Reilly Lawn saw blood on the knife that he held, and called 911.

2. Other Eyewitnesses

Three people were present inside the kitchen area of the apartment where the fatal altercation occurred: Ashlynn Waller, Nicholas Panagiotes, and Trevor Demmons. Those eyewitnesses consistently reported that up to the verbal argument between Reilly Lawn and Jake Seaburg, they all had been "hanging out" together inside the apartment, and there had been no hostility or rancor among anyone.⁶ Their separate eyewitness

⁶ Another person, Nolan Sasner, was with the others inside the apartment, but left just before Reilly Lawn and Jake Seaburg began arguing. He also reported that interactions between people inside the apartment up to the point when he left were amicable and casual.

accounts of the physical confrontation that ensued – which all described an unexpected and quickly-unfolding event – are summarized below.

Ashlynn Waller

Ms. Waller recalled that at the beginning of the argument between Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg, she believed that both were sitting at the kitchen table. Mr. Seaburg then stood up and was “screaming in [Reilly Lawn’s] face.” Initially, Ms. Waller reported that she believed that she saw Reilly Lawn take out a knife and stab Mr. Seaburg, and then Mr. Seaburg “slammed” Reilly Lawn to the floor. However, Ms. Waller also reported that she saw the physical encounter between the two for only a “split second,” that she was unsure whether Mr. Seaburg was stabbed before or after he took Reilly Lawn to the floor, and that she did not see what happened between them on the floor after Mr. Seaburg took down Lawn.

Trevor Demmons

Mr. Demmons reported that during the verbal argument, while Mr. Seaburg was standing up and Reilly Lawn was seated at the kitchen table, Reilly Lawn “grabbed” one of the knives that he had been showing earlier, stood up, and “got in [Mr. Seaburg’s] face.” At that point, Mr. Seaburg, who Mr. Demmons noted had been a competitive wrestler, “instantly retaliated” by grabbing Reilly Lawn and “flip[ing] him over” to the floor. At that point, Mr. Demmons quickly escorted Ms. Waller from the apartment and did not see what happened between Mr. Seaburg and Reilly Lawn after Mr. Seaburg took him to the floor.

Nicholas Panagiotes

Mr. Panagiotes reported that Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg were seated at the kitchen table when they began to argue. Mr. Seaburg stood up and was yelling at Reilly Lawn, at which point Mr. Panagiotes suspected that the two might “scuffle.” Reilly Lawn then rose from his seat, at which point Mr. Seaburg, who Mr. Panagiotes knew to be a former competitive wrestler, picked up Reilly Lawn, “slammed” him to the floor while on top of him, and started punching him. Mr. Panagiotes quickly separated Mr. Seaburg from Reilly Lawn, and it was not until Mr. Seaburg collapsed that Mr. Panagiotes realized that Mr. Seaburg had been stabbed. Although Mr. Panagiotes recalled that before the argument Reilly Lawn had shown others knives that he had as part of casual conversation, he never saw Reilly Lawn reach for or holding a knife during the argument with Mr. Seaburg, and realized that Mr. Seaburg had been stabbed only after he saw the bloody wounds afterwards.

D. 911 Call

Reilly Lawn called 911 from his cellphone at about 5:00 a.m. on December 12. In that call, Reilly Lawn reported that when Mr. Seaburg “got in his face,” he panicked and grabbed a knife to keep him away. Reilly Lawn also reported that while Mr. Seaburg was on top of him and punching him, he “stabbed underneath him.” Reilly Lawn also relayed, in response to questioning by the 911 operator, that he believed that he stabbed Mr. Seaburg twice, in his stomach area.

E. Physical Evidence and Autopsy Results

1. Physical Evidence

Police recovered the knife used in the fatal stabbing from inside Reilly Lawn's apartment where he left it on the kitchen table. The knife, which has a single-edged blade that measures about 3¾ inches long, had apparent bloodstaining on it.

Reilly Lawn had visible injuries to his face, consistent with the punches by Jake Seaburg that he and the eyewitnesses recounted, as well as a cut to his lower leg, a wound he could not recall sustaining. Reilly Lawn also claimed pain in his hip area, although he also could not recall how that injury occurred.

2. Autopsy Results

On December 12, 2020, Deputy Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Mitchell Weinberg conducted an autopsy on Jake Seaburg's body. The autopsy showed that Mr. Seaburg sustained two separate stab wounds, both to his chest. The wound trajectory for each stab was slightly upwards, and the wound tracts for both indicated that the blade edge faced upward. Dr. Weinberg determined that the manner of Mr. Seaburg's death was homicide and that the cause of his death were the two stab wounds. Toxicological testing revealed that at the time of Mr. Seaburg's death he had a blood alcohol concentration of .141.⁷ Mr. Seaburg was about 5'04" tall, which is about three inches shorter than Reilly Lawn; the two weighed about the same.

⁷ That alcohol concentration is almost twice the legal limit to operate a motor vehicle (.08). RSA 265-A:2, I(b). Mr. Seaburg's actual intoxication level may have been higher, because as part of medical efforts to attempt to save his life he received blood transfusions, which may have diluted his true blood alcohol content. Toxicology testing also revealed the presence of caffeine, marijuana, and marijuana metabolites.

IV. THE APPLICABLE LAW

Here, claims have been asserted of both accident and self-defense. Those claims are not mutually exclusive. That is, Reilly Lawn has not claimed at different times that the stabbing was accidental and that he acted in self-defense. Rather, Reilly Lawn has claimed that both unintentional conduct – accident – and intentional conduct – self-defense – occurred in the same incident. This is an assertion that he has consistently made. Accordingly, the claim requires discussion of both defenses.

Although not codified by statute, accident is recognized as a complete defense, including to homicidal acts. *See State v. Rosciti*, 144 N.H. 198, 200 (1999); *State v. Aubert*, 120 N.H. 634, 635 (1980). Conduct is accidental, and thus not criminal, when the conduct is not the product of any particular mental state, or *mens rea*, such as intent or negligence. *See, e.g., Hill v. State*, 684 S.E.2d 356, 358 (Ga. App. 2009); *State v. Owens*, 831 S.E.2d 126, 128 (S.C. 2019).

Another defense raised by Reilly Lawn’s account of events is that of self-defense. Unlike the defense of accident, self-defense requires conduct that is accompanied by *mens rea*. An example used to illustrate the distinction between the two defenses is the following: an actor arms himself with a pistol out of claimed fear of another person, and either: (1) drops the gun, which discharges and causes harm; or (2) intentionally pulls the trigger, causing harm. The first alternative raises accident, while the second alternative raises self-defense.

New Hampshire’s self-defense laws are contained in RSA Chapter 627. In particular to this case:

A person is justified in using deadly force upon another person when he reasonably believes that such other person [i]s about to use unlawful, deadly force against the actor . . .

RSA 627:4, II(a).⁸ Also of relevance here is the legal definition of what does, and does not, constitute “deadly force:”

“Deadly force” means any assault or confinement which the actor commits with the purpose of causing or which he knows to create a substantial risk of causing death or serious bodily injury.

“Non-deadly force” means any assault or confinement with does not constitute deadly force. *The act of producing or displaying a weapon shall constitute non-deadly force.*

RSA 627:9, II & IV (emphasis added).

The New Hampshire Supreme Court has addressed the use of deadly force used in self-defense, finding that:

[A] person is generally justified in using deadly force upon another only if such force is necessary to protect himself (or another) from the use of *unlawful deadly force or an imminent threat to life or basic bodily integrity*. Implicit in this rule are the notions: (1) that deadly force should be used only when, and to the extent, “necessary”; and (2) that the force used in response to the threat should not be excessive in relation to the harm threatened.

State v. Etienne, 163 N.H. 57, 74-75 (2011) (quotation marks omitted; emphasis added).

When interpreting the self-defense statutes, the New Hampshire Supreme Court has looked to the common law for “its balance of the right to defend oneself and the restrictions upon that right based upon the general principle that the law places great weight upon the sanctity of human life in determining the reasonable necessity of killing a human being.” *Id.* at 75 (quotation marks omitted).

⁸ The fatal stabbing occurred inside the apartment where Reilly Lawn lived. The Criminal Code has additional provisions that may apply when an actor’s use of deadly force occurs inside his or her residence or curtilage. *See, e.g.*, RSA 627:4, II(d) & III(a). However, those provisions only come into possible application when the actor is confronted with deadly physical force, a peril that Reilly Lawn did not face from Mr. Seaburg. *See infra*.

In any case in which a claim has been asserted of either accident or self-defense, the State has the burden to disprove the claim beyond a reasonable doubt in order to secure a conviction. *See Rosciti*, 144 N.H. at 200; *State v. McMinn*, 141 N.H. 636, 644-45 (1997).

V. ANALYSIS

It is conclusively established that on December 12, 2020, Jake Seaburg was stabbed by a knife held by Reilly Lawn inside the latter's apartment. That stabbing caused Mr. Seaburg's death. The evidence gathered from the investigation into that fatal stabbing – not only Reilly Lawn's recounting of events, but also the corroborating accounts given by the three eyewitnesses – also supports the conclusion that the stabbing was immediately preceded by a verbal argument between Reilly Lawn and Mr. Seaburg, that Reilly Lawn armed himself with a knife, and that Mr. Seaburg initiated the physical confrontation by punching Reilly Lawn and violently taking him to the floor.

As to Reilly Lawn's conduct in arming himself with a knife, although Jake Seaburg at that moment may have posed a risk of only physical force, *i.e.*, assault by punches or other bodily force, under the law Reilly Lawn's conduct of arming himself did not constitute the use of deadly force. Again, under the law, "[t]he act of producing or displaying a weapon shall constitute non-deadly force." RSA 627:9, IV.

Reilly Lawn's admitted use of the knife that he produced to actually try to stab Mr. Seaburg does constitute the use of deadly force. RSA 627:9, II. Consequently, analysis turns to whether Reilly Lawn "reasonably believe[d] that [Mr. Seaburg was] about to use unlawful, deadly force against" him, RSA 627:4, II(a), so as to support his claim of self-defense.

According to Reilly Lawn's own account, he attempted to stab Mr. Seaburg in "self-defense" in order to stop Mr. Seaburg from continuing to beat him physically. Although Reilly Lawn claimed that he heard Mr. Seaburg threaten to "kill" him before approaching and throwing him to the ground, Reilly Lawn also was clear in both of his statements to investigators that he stabbed in "self-defense" not to stop what he believed to be the use or imminent use of *deadly* physical force by Mr. Seaburg, but rather to stop Mr. Seaburg's physical beating. Reilly Lawn never claimed that he believed Mr. Seaburg to be armed; not did Lawn ever claim that at the moment when he tried to stab Mr. Seaburg he feared a risk of death or serious bodily injury. Because at the moment of Reilly Lawn's use of deadly physical force he by his own admission did not fear the use or imminent use of deadly force against him, he was not legally justified to use his own deadly force.

Next is the consideration of the claim of accident. That is, Reilly Lawn's stated belief that, in effect, Mr. Seaburg impaled himself on the knife that Lawn held when Mr. Seaburg violently took Lawn to the floor. That claim presents a valid accident scenario, which must be disproven beyond a reasonable doubt.

Here, based on the totality of the evidence, that claim cannot be so disproven. There is nothing inherently contradictory or counterintuitive in Reilly Lawn's claim of accident. It is a claim that he raised in both of his interviews with investigators. And, although Reilly Lawn also asserted self-defense, according to his consistent narrative his claimed defensive use of deadly force occurred after he believed that Mr. Seaburg was stabbed by accident in the violent takedown and struggle on the floor. It also is pertinent to the analysis that there was no prior relationship, let alone animus, between Reilly

Lawn and Mr. Seaburg; that the escalation of a verbal argument into a physical altercation was sudden and unexpected; that there was no reliable evidence that Reilly Lawn ever brandished in an aggressive manner the knife that he admittedly held; and that the consistent account of everyone who saw the altercation was that Mr. Seaburg initiated physical contact with Lawn during an argument. All of these circumstances support the conclusion that at the time of the claimed accident Reilly Lawn had not formed any particular intent to act with the knife other than to ward off, and objectively add credence to the claim of accident.

Next, Reilly Lawn's account of events objectively and plausibly supports the claim of accident. In particular, Reilly Lawn's holding of the knife outward and at his waist would place that weapon in the area of Jake Seaburg's chest in a tackling-type take-down move, a technique with which Mr. Seaburg, a former competitive wrestler, was well-familiar. So too could Mr. Seaburg's act of landing full-force on top of Reilly Lawn on the floor, and then pushing his body upwards and into Reilly Lawn as he lay on the floor, cause the very accidental stabbing that Reilly Lawn believed occurred before he consciously acted in alleged self-defense.

Moreover, the eyewitness accounts and autopsy findings do not contradict the claim of accident, and in fact support it. As to the eyewitnesses, the consistent account by everyone was that Mr. Seaburg quickly and violently took Reilly Lawn to the ground, landing on top of him. Those accounts corroborate that provided by Reilly Lawn. Only one eyewitness – Ms. Waller – claimed to actually see Reilly Lawn stab Mr. Seaburg. But Ms. Waller was equivocal at best as to whether the stabbing was something that she actually saw or just believed, and in that same account she also reported that she only saw

the beginning of the physical altercation. As to the other two eyewitnesses, one – Mr. Demmons – did not ever see Reilly Lawn stab Mr. Seaburg, and like Ms. Waller did not see the altercation after Lawn was taken to the floor – and the other – Mr. Panagiotes – did not even know that Reilly Lawn had a knife.

Turning to the autopsy findings, the placement and trajectory of the two wounds to Mr. Seaburg’s chest – slightly upward, with the sharp edge facing up – is consistent with Reilly Lawn’s claim that he held the knife at waist level, perpendicular to his body, and blade up when Mr. Seaburg forcibly took him to the floor and landed on top of him. And, although the infliction of multiple wounds at first blush may seem to contradict a claim of accident, here, again, two wounds is consistent with Mr. Seaburg’s violent movements during the altercation, in which he quickly first landed on top of Reilly Lawn on the floor and then forcibly moved up Lawn’s body.

VI. CONCLUSION

Reilly Lawn has claimed that he believed that Jake Seaburg was accidentally stabbed when Mr. Seaburg physically assaulted him. That belief is not contradicted by the evidence gathered from the investigation conducted into Mr. Seaburg’s homicide. To the contrary, aspects of the claim are consistent with, or supported by, gathered evidence. Consequently, based upon the applicable law and all the facts and circumstances of this case, the Attorney General’s Office has determined that the State would be unable to disprove the claimed defense of accident beyond a reasonable doubt. Because such a claim would defeat any charges brought by the State, no homicide charges will be brought against Reilly Lawn in connection with the stabbing death of Jake Seaburg.