

# A train ride, a delay – and a death

By **Roger Chesley** - July 31, 2019



*Police in Chesterfield investigate a 2018 death on the train tracks. (Virginia Mercury)*

Amtrak Train 93 was already an hour late when it headed south out of Washington bound for Norfolk the other evening. Many passengers – including me – just longed for a cozy bed to envelop them as we got closer to Hampton Roads. The Petersburg station, the penultimate stop on this journey, was tantalizingly close.

That's when the conductor, in a somber voice also tinged with frustration, took the microphone around 10 p.m. Friday night.

A northbound CSX train, running along the same tracks we needed to use, had just struck and killed someone. The man had been lying across the tracks, the conductor noted. Given the experience with similar incidents, we were destined for at least a two-hour wait as police and medical examiners investigated.

Some folks gasped. Others were pissed – especially those planning to exit in Petersburg, just one mile away. “I didn't expect for a three-hour trip to take eight hours!” one guy fumed. He threw in a few expletives to spice up the commentary.

I wondered whether the mortally injured man, whom Chesterfield County Police later identified as 30-year-old Ronnie R. Coleman of the Ettrick section, had committed suicide.

That's because [“suicide by train”](#) happens frequently enough nationwide. Why else would Coleman be lying across tracks used by both CSX and Amtrak?

The commonwealth, meanwhile, has witnessed an uptick in the number of suicides – whatever the method – over the past several years. [A state report last year said suicides](#) have slowly increased since 1999.

The same report noted what the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services is doing to try to stem the rise. The techniques include partnering with gun shops and shooting ranges to discuss suicide prevention with clients, and promoting mental health awareness programs.

Virginia's rate of suicide in 2016 was 13.4 per 100,000 people, roughly the same as the national rate, [according to an analysis of data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

I need to make this clear, too: No one has officially declared Coleman's death a suicide. It could be something else.

Lt. Brad Conner, with the Chesterfield County Police, told me Tuesday it's either a suicide or an accidental death. Police had ruled out homicide.

But no suicide notes were found, Conner added. Family and friends told investigators that Coleman didn't have any mental health problems; most suicides are related to mental illness.

“The family hasn't given us any indication he had intended any harm to himself,” the lieutenant continued. I couldn't reach Coleman's relatives.

An official with the state medical examiner's office told me the cause and manner of death could take months, but he added the circumstances were “pretty horrendous.” [A news report](#) noted the train tracks pass right behind Coleman's home, near where the CSX train struck him.

Suicide by train doesn't happen often in Virginia, [according to a federal database](#). Three cases occurred from Jan. 1, 2017, through April of this year.

Across the country, there were 573 suicides by train in that time frame. An Amtrak spokeswoman, by email, said nearly 200 National Suicide Prevention LIFELINE signs are placed along the right-of-way, on platforms and at stations that have the highest suicide strike rates involving Amtrak trains.

Like many methods of suicide, it seems a particularly painful, and brutal, way to die.

As Friday night turned into Saturday morning, we finally got moving again at 1:30 a.m. , a 3½-hour delay. Norfolk-bound passengers didn't arrive at our terminal until after 3 a.m.

At least we weren't mourning the loss of a loved one. Or wondering why he was prone on those train tracks near Petersburg.

**Roger Chesley**

Longtime columnist and editorial writer Roger Chesley worked at the (Newport News) Daily Press and The (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot from 1997 through 2018.

# Amid creeping carnage, one Virginia police chief keeps spotlight on black men as crime victims – and suspects

By **Roger Chesley** - September 5, 2019



*Police investigate a shooting in Richmond last month. (NBC12)*

Chief Larry Boone has taken to begging.

As young black men continue to wield guns to settle differences, rob and murder each other, Norfolk's top cop has repeatedly criticized, cajoled and complained this past year in community gatherings, press conferences and through social media.

Boone is urging everyone to approach gun crimes the same way public health officials and lawmakers are now fighting the opioid crisis across America. He wonders why more residents aren't fired up about the firearms-related violence.

He's right, sadly.

You've probably heard more about rival, fast-food chicken sandwiches than about the recent loss of human life in violence-plagued communities across the state. Too few people give a damn about the creeping carnage. The killings have become far too commonplace.

“Systems create this,” Boone said at a news conference late last week, suggesting city leaders look at poverty, education and more. His campaign to keep the crisis front and center followed a week in which 10 people were shot and five killed – including a stabbing – in Norfolk, the commonwealth’s second-largest city; it’s behind only Virginia Beach in population.

*Norfolk Police Chief Larry Boone. (City of Norfolk)*

Boone is bewildered, and rightly so. Mass shootings are driving plenty of national attention, including the Virginia Beach municipal building killings and [the Aug. 31 rampage in Texas](#). But the persistent gun violence in communities across the nation is a larger scourge and exacts a much heavier toll.

The Norfolk slayings are largely intraracial, as are many crimes in the country. And it affects African-Americans disproportionately.

I wonder if gun-rights groups would be so resistant to new laws if whites were the victims in such lopsided percentages. That’s a topic for another day.

Goodness knows, Chief Boone hasn’t been silent. He’s hosted several “Guns Down” rallies around the city. He’s gone on radio. He’s partnered with [a local artist and rapper on an anthem urging young men to reject gun violence](#). The chief has challenged city officials to do more.

He now says he’ll form a committee to attack the problem, and he’ll ask judges, lawyers, school officials, medical professionals and others to be on it. Boone wants state lawmakers to do their part by passing legislation forcing people to notify officials when their guns are lost, stolen or sold – though that’s not the major focus of his initiative.

Statistics reveal why he’s so adamant:

The Virginian-Pilot reports: “Black men are either suspect or victim in 93 percent to 94 percent of shootings in Norfolk, Boone said – and often both. The chief added that those demographics have persisted throughout his 30-year career in the department.”

Blacks, though, make up just 42 percent of the city’s population. The disparity is stunning. Reducing that ratio – and violence in general – would improve the lives of countless numbers of Norfolk residents.

That wide disparity is also true in crime stats statewide.

Whites comprise 69.5 percent of the population in Virginia and blacks are 20 percent. But among the homicide totals in 2018, blacks comprised 60 percent of the 391 victims.



The same [Virginia State Police report](#) noted that blacks accounted for 60.4 percent of suspects in homicide cases last year.

Some perspective is needed about the homicide totals. It's important to note that we are nowhere near the bloodshed that was all too common in Virginia – and around the country – during the height of the crack epidemic decades ago. Norfolk suffered a record 86 homicides, among all races, in 1991. Richmond's record was 162 in 1994.

Currently, there have been 26 homicides in Norfolk, about the same number as this time last year. As of Sept. 3, Richmond had 39 homicides, roughly the same total for the period in 2018.

Yet so many of these crimes are pointless, fueled by male bravado, drug-dealing and other nonsense. Too many lives are lost because of foolishness.

It's why Chief Boone keeps speaking out. Will others heed his call?

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## Legislator knows where blame truly lies in ballot screw-up

By **Roger Chesley** - August 7, 2019



*Del. Nick Freitas, R-Culpeper. (Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury)*

Del. Nicholas Freitas asserts state elections officials are picking on him.

The bullies. They won't give him a pass for his inattention to detail.

The Culpeper Republican even took [to his Facebook page](#) last week, casting aspersions on two of Gov. Ralph Northam's appointees on the state Board of Elections.

Freitas was a little light, though, in the FB screed to followers Aug. 2 about his own responsibility – or failure – in all of this. Namely, that [he and his campaign staff didn't get paperwork related to his candidacy](#) on time to the state Department of Elections. The state also said Freitas didn't send another form that he should've personally filed as a candidate.

My phone, email and Facebook messages to the delegate weren't returned.

A last-minute gambit Tuesday, [initiated by the lone Republican](#) on the three-member Board of Elections, failed to get Freitas on the ballot, as well. That was the correct call.

I know government officials can adhere to rules often in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. Yet Freitas, who was first elected to the House of Delegates in 2015, can't claim he doesn't know the ballot routine. There are procedures and deadlines to follow. It's not his first rodeo, after all.

His criticisms of the department and the Board of Elections are misplaced and cynical, designed to deflect from his own shortcomings. Freitas could still win a promised write-in campaign, but it will be a tougher slog than if his name were on the ballot.

Democrat Ann Ridgeway is the lone candidate listed for the 30th District on the department's website. It's her first bid for elective office, but the road might have just gotten easier.

Let's peel back the layers of this headache for Freitas – and by extension, his party.

This controversy is critical because the GOP holds a thin majority in the state House (and state Senate, too). A few seats swinging to the Democrats could alter the legislation that passes both chambers.

Republicans were counting on Freitas to easily retain his seat in the solidly red, rural district of Culpeper, Madison and Orange counties. In 2017, he beat the Democrat 62 to 38 percent in an anti-Trump wave that nearly turned the state House blue.

This year, he didn't face a primary challenger. But then his troubles started, according to news reports:

The Department of Elections said it didn't get the delegate's paperwork on time. He later exited the race so local Republicans could name him as a replacement candidate, [but that tactic ultimately failed](#) because of the regulations.

The fact Freitas that didn't file a candidate qualification form is one big difference, an elections official told me, between Freitas' situation and other candidates the board later allowed on the ballot in their respective contests.

On his Facebook post last week, Freitas said he's the candidate that Republicans in the 30th District wanted on the ballot. "Unfortunately, the Department of Elections decided to grant extensions to everyone except me," he said, suggesting persecution – as well as partisanship by the two Democrats on the board.

Well.

Northam, of course, is a Democrat. He gets to name a majority of members on bodies such as the Board of Elections. So it's a little disingenuous to complain about the composition.



It's also true the board *unanimously* approved appeals by candidates from *both* parties, including Republican Del. Terry Kilgore, R-Scott, and Democratic candidate Clinton Jenkins. The latter will face Republican Del. Chris Jones, R-Suffolk.

I'd also note that two board members know a few things about this routine, because they're General Assembly veterans.

Democrat Robert Brink, the chair, is a former delegate from Arlington. Republican John O'Bannon, the vice chair, is a former delegate from the Richmond area. Both served more than a dozen years in the state legislature.

The third member is attorney Jamilah D. LeCruise, who runs her own law firm in Norfolk. The Democrat is active in party politics in Norfolk.

It's a time-worn tactic by politicians to complain about others when they, in fact, failed to follow the procedures. They then beg governing bodies to forgive their preventable mistakes. It's sort of like the old excuse: "The dog ate my homework. Can you cut me some slack?"

Freitas, like many before him, knows where the real problem lies.

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