



BCPO News

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Arrest Made in January Edgewater Park Double Fatal Shooting

Burlington County Prosecutor Scott Coffina and Edgewater Park Township Police Chief Robert D. Hess announced that a 27-year-old Delran man has been charged with fatally shooting two people at a party in Edgewater Park in January.

Ronny Paden, of the 200 block of Hawthorne Way, was charged with two counts of Murder (First Degree) Conspiracy to Commit Murder (First Degree), Possession of a Weapon for an Unlawful Purpose (Second Degree), Unlawful Possession of a Weapon (Second Degree) and Certain Persons not to Have Firearms (Second Degree). He was taken into custody May 7.

The investigation began after police were called to the home in the 200 block of Dogwood Road just before 1 a.m. on January 24 and discovered the bodies of James Gist III, 29, of Westampton and Marcus Thompson, 29, of Willingboro.

Gist had been shot while inside the driver's seat of a parked vehicle. Thompson was shot inside the residence. Both men were pronounced dead at the scene.

Approximately 10 people had gathered at the house to celebrate a birthday. The decedents were the only ones struck by gunfire. The investigation revealed that neither victim was the intended target.

During a hearing today in Superior Court, the Hon. Christopher J. Garrenger, J.S.C., ordered that Paden be detained in the Burlington County Jail until the charges are adjudicated. Assistant Prosecutor Jamie Hutchinson noted during the proceeding that the homicides were committed after Paden was released months early from a New Jersey state prison sentence in November 2020 under a law designed to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus among state inmates. The law automatically reduced prison sentences with less than one year remaining.

Prosecutor Coffina said this case "forces us to pause and consider the public safety implications of the drive over the past year to release inmates early, purportedly due to the coronavirus pandemic."

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“While no one wants state inmates or detainees placed at undue medical risk, the data suggests that inmates are no more likely to die of COVID-19 than any other New Jersey resident,” Prosecutor Coffina said. “Due to ‘COVID credits’ applied to his sentence, this defendant and many other inmates have been released early from duly-imposed sentences without any individualized consideration of the crime for which they were convicted or the risk that they will resume their criminal activities. A risk assessment is done before a defendant is released from pretrial detention, while the presumption of innocence still attaches; no less of an assessment should be done for people who actually have been convicted of a crime, especially a violent crime.

“Our residents have been traumatized by the pandemic over the past year-plus, forced to fear for their health, their jobs and their children’s education. They shouldn’t have to fear indiscriminate gun violence as well. Our residents’ safety ought to be given at least equal weight to the health risks to our inmates, especially since our prison system has effectively managed the coronavirus to keep prisoners safe.”

Paden will be prosecuted by Assistant Prosecutor Bob Van Gilst, supervisor of the BCPO Major Crimes Unit – Violent Crimes Section.

The investigation was conducted by detectives from the BCPO and the Edgewater Park Township Police Department, with assistance from the Burlington County Sheriff’s Department, the Delran Township Police Department, New Jersey State Police, and the U.S. Marshals Service – New York/New Jersey Regional Fugitive Task Force. The lead investigators are BCPO Detective Erica Ridge and EPTPD Detective Charles Ryder.

All persons are considered innocent unless and until proven guilty in a court of law.

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