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Shooting that killed Buffalo Grove mom called 'random as it could be'



Tracy Czackowski, the 44-year-old Buffalo Grove mother who was the victim of an apparent random shooting Sunday on I-90/94 in Wisconsin, has died, the Dane County sheriff's office confirmed Tuesday afternoon.

Erin Hegarty



Jamie Sotonoff

Family and friends of 44-year-old Buffalo Grove mom Tracy Czackowski are grieving her death and struggling to make sense of the random drive-by shooting that took her life.

Czaczkowski died Tuesday, two days after she was shot while sitting in the passenger seat of her family's car, riding home from a trip to the Wisconsin Dells with her husband and two young children.

As their BMW sedan passed a Chevrolet Blazer on the left, the driver of the Blazer -- a suspect in a murder earlier that morning -- rolled down his window and shot three times at the family, according to Sauk County Sheriff Chip Meister. One of the bullets went through the passenger's-side window and hit Tracy Czaczkowski in the neck.

She was rushed to the hospital in Madison where she remained on life support until her six siblings made their way there from several states, ABC 7 reported (<http://abc7chicago.com/news/mother-heading-home-from-wisconsin-dells-fatally-shot-on-expressway/1319926/>). Her organs were going to be donated, Sauk County Coroner Greg Hahn said.

"We are all extremely proud of what Tracy accomplished in life, the wonderful family she created and the joy she brought to everyone around her. We ask for prayers for her loving husband and children," Tracy's brother told ABC 7.

A statement released on the family's behalf says they were devastated by her death, just days before Mother's Day.

"The family is asking for privacy in this difficult time so that they can comfort each other. The family would like to say thank you for the prayers and outpouring of support for Tracy," the statement reads.

Czaczkowski's husband, Greg, is an 11-year employee at the Drug Enforcement Administration. But Dennis Wichern, special agent in charge of the DEA Chicago field division, said the shooting is not believed to be connected to Greg's role.

"None whatsoever at this time," Wichern said. "This is as random as it could be."

"Greg's doing very good under probably the hardest circumstance of his life," Wichern said. "He's holding up well thanks to his friends and circle of family that he has around him."

Wichern called the case "the most tragic incident I've ever seen in my 30 years of being in law enforcement."

The suspected shooter has been identified as Zachary T. Hays, 20, of West Allis, Wisconsin. Multiple Wisconsin counties, including Milwaukee, Columbia, Sauk, and Dane, are deciding what charges will be filed against him in connection with the Czaczkowski shooting, as well as a suburban Milwaukee slaying to which he's been linked.

He's been in trouble with the law before -- court records show Hays was found guilty in 2013 of battery and receiving stolen property. He was sentenced to two years' probation for the battery charge, though no details about the case were immediately available Tuesday.

Hays had two of his brothers in the car with him at the time of the shooting. His older brother, Jeremy A. Hays, 30, is being held on a tentative charge of felon in possession of a firearm, authorities said. Another older brother with them at the time of Sunday's shooting is not being named by police due to his cognitive disability.

The investigation is still continuing. Anyone with information is encouraged to call a tip line at (608) 284-6900.



- 1) West Allis:** Man found fatally shot in apartment Sunday morning.
- 2) Epikos Church in Milwaukee:** Suspect had made threats to a member, causing church to cancel Sunday evening services.
- 3) Wisconsin Dells:** Suspect and brothers drive to the Dells area, then drive toward Madison Sunday afternoon. Victim and family, on the way home to Illinois from the Dells, pass the suspect's Chevy Blazer. Victim is shot.
- 4) Dane County:** Officers chase suspect into county, where he is stopped with spike strips.

Sources: News reports

According to earlier statements from law enforcement, three shots were fired at the Czaczkowskis' car just before 3 p.m. Sunday. The first lodged inside the passenger door. The second hit Tracy, and the third hit the car's hood.

Tracy Czackowski was taken to St. Clare Hospital in Baraboo and then flown to University Hospital in Madison, where she was placed on life support. No other family members were reported injured.

An unidentified witness traveling south on I-94 called 911 at 2:55 p.m. to report the drive-by shooting and its location at milepost 95, near DeForest, Wisconsin. That witness continued to follow Hays' car, authorities said, until it was stopped by a spike strip that police had placed across the road.

Upon stopping, Zachary Hays got out of the vehicle and walked toward officers with a handgun, authorities said. After ignoring commands to stop, the officers shot him, officials said. He remains hospitalized with injuries not believed to be life-threatening, police said.

Authorities say Hays also is suspected in a fatal shooting that occurred at 6:53 a.m. Sunday in West Allis, a suburb of Milwaukee.

The unidentified Hays brother, 34, is tentatively being charged with "expelling bodily fluids on a police officer," according to Dane County Sheriff spokeswoman Elise Schaffer.

Law enforcement also recovered a long gun from the Blazer, Schaffer said.

Wichern called Czackowski a loving mother and great partner to her husband, and said she loved the outdoors and hiking. She was employed as a dental hygienist.

Funeral arrangements are pending. Those wishing to assist Tracy Czackowski's children, who are students at St. Mary's School in Buffalo Grove, with future needs such as education can make donations at [gofundme.com/CzackowskiFamily](http://www.gofundme.com/CzackowskiFamily) (<http://www.gofundme.com/CzackowskiFamily>).

- Daily Herald news services contributed to this report.