

Aftermath of a tragedy

A month after a fatal standoff in Corry, cleanup of house continues

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Published: June 08. 2008 6:00AM

CORRY -- Walls with dents and pink stains from tear gas need to be restored and painted. Shattered windows will be replaced. All the carpeting will eventually be removed.

And Justin Smith is doing it all.

Smith, 19, faces the task of cleaning up his family's home, at 156 Wright St. in Corry, after his sister's estranged husband committed suicide there during a police standoff on May 7.

Smith and his family still can't live in the house, mainly because of damage from tear gas that police used when Tony Bromley -- the husband of Justin Smith's sister, Michelle Bromley -- barricaded himself inside before dying from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

The Smiths' predicament raises a question that must be confronted following an incident of violence or trauma: After the police leave, who handles the cleanup?

Smith and another sister, Tara Griffis, said they found about 20 tear-gas canisters in the home. Repairing that damage will be tough, cleaning specialists said.

Tear gas "gets into everything," said David O'Brien, owner and operator of Crime Scene Clean Team/Rapid Responders, a California-based company with a nationwide network of specialists. "It'll go through the wall, into air ducts, insulation."

For Justin Smith, his family had little choice but to take on the task of cleaning the house on their own. Smith and Griffis, 27, said estimates to fumigate the tear gas and repair the damage were as high as \$20,000.

Homeowners insurance usually covers the cost, but the house -- owned by their mother, Karen Smith -- is not insured.

Michelle Bromley also lived in the home with her three children, ages 12, 13 and 15. She, her children and Karen Smith, are staying with Griffis. Justin Smith is living with his girlfriend.

Griffis' crowded home -- she has three children herself -- and a desire to regain a sense of normalcy have made cleaning the Wright Street house an urgent task. But Justin Smith said it would likely be several months before the family can return.

"As we keep going, we find more and more stuff we're going to have to do," Griffis said.

Police must balance protecting themselves with preventing unnecessary damage.

"If it's too dangerous to send (officers) in, we're going to make that person come out to us," said Lt. Les Fetterman of the Erie police SWAT team, which was on the scene of the standoff.

He said his team tries to direct homeowners about how to clean up and will provide contacts who can make further recommendations.

Salvaging memories

This cleanup hasn't been easy. One of the next steps, Griffis said, is to wash the tear gas residue on the floor, then clean it with shop vacuums. That likely will cause water damage, she said. The family hopes to salvage personal items that weren't affected by the tear gas. Drywall that canisters hit and dented will need to be replaced.

"We're trying to get as many visible reminders out" as possible, Griffis said.

It has been difficult for many family members to enter the house, but Justin Smith said he wasn't too upset to clean.

"The rest of my family didn't want to see the stuff," he said.

Cleaning up after a suicide and spending an extended time away from home can be traumatizing, said *Matthew Dovel*, **president of International Suicide Prevention**. He said it is "devastating" to be displaced in any situation and that a suicide makes it even more draining.

Other concerns

Justin Smith and his family are looking forward to returning when the home is in better condition. But those who sell their homes after a trauma occurs there could have a harder time doing so, said Toby Froehlich, president of the real estate agency Coldwell Banker Select.

In Pennsylvania, sellers are not required to tell potential buyers that a violent incident occurred in the home, but Froehlich said his company advises sellers to

disclose early.

"Some people are affected by those things, and some people aren't," he said.

It might be tempting to leave violent memories behind quickly, but Justin Smith said there was no question about whether the family would return to the home, which Karen Smith and her husband bought in 1976.

"It's just insane not living there," Justin Smith said.

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