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41 bullet casings found at fatal shooting of Harris County Deputy Esqueda, DA's office says

By **Nicole Hensley, John Wayne Ferguson**, *Staff writers*

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Ronald Palmer, a man accused in the shooting death of Harris County Sheriff's Office Deputy Fernando Esqueda, makes an appearance in the 248th District Courtroom on Monday, July 15, 2024 in Houston.
Elizabeth Conley/Staff Photographer

Monday morning started with a four-mile procession for fallen Deputy Fernando Esqueda and ended with his grieving family catching their first look at the man accused of killing him.

The defendant, Ronald Palmer, appeared briefly in a Harris County courtroom on a capital murder of a police officer charge, saying little except to acknowledge a judge's questions about his rights. Police accused Palmer of shooting the 28-year-old Harris County Sheriff's Office deputy of five years last Wednesday during his search for a man suspected of pistol-whipping a Little Caesars worker.

Another man, Dremone Francis, was also charged with capital murder of a police officer in connection with Esqueda's death.

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Prosecutors said they hope to hold Palmer without bail until his trial, where jurors could convict and condemn him to death.

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Esqueda's loved ones, some of whom also work in law enforcement, filled two rows in the 248th District Court as they waited for Palmer to emerge from a holdover room for jailed defendants. About 40 uniformed law enforcement officials, including Sheriff Ed Gonzalez, joined them in the courtroom — a show of support rarely seen following an on-duty death of a deputy or officer.

A bailiff rushed a pack of tissues to Esqueda's mother as she began to cry. His funeral is scheduled Friday at the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart.



Ronald Palmer, a man accused in the shooting death of Harris County Sheriff's Office Deputy Fernando Esqueda, makes an appearance in a full courtroom at the 248th District Court on Monday, July 15, 2024 in Houston. Along with family members of the 28-year-old deputies, more than 40 law enforcement officials were present.

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Few details were disclosed in court about how the shooting unfolded, but that information could be introduced in September at a proof-evident hearing aimed at holding Palmer without bail until the outcome of his case.

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Esqueda was fully uniformed but sitting inside a gray pick-up truck when he was shot, according to court records.

Cheryl Irvin, one of Palmer's appointed defense attorneys, shook the hands of Gonzalez and other officials in court. She remained adamant about Palmer's presumed innocence after his appearance.

"We don't know what his role was, but we're going to do our best to defend him," Irvin said.



Defending attorney Cheryl Irvin holds the shoulder of Harris County Captain Ben Katrib before Ronald Palmer, a man accused in the shooting death of Harris County Sheriff's Office Deputy Fernando Esqueda, makes an appearance in the 248th District Courtroom on Monday, July 15, 2024 in Houston.

Elizabeth Conley/Staff Photographer

41 bullet casings found

According to court documents, Francis and Palmer were discussing the altercation at the fast food pizzeria — where authorities said Palmer became irate that his pizza did not resemble an advertisement — when they noticed Esqueda watching them.

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Palmer then told a witness he was “going to do some business,” a magistrate said Friday.

Officials believe that two guns were used during the shooting, but haven’t said if both men were accused of firing weapons. Investigators found 41 bullet casings at the scene, officials said.

Esqueda was shot around 11:48 p.m., according to a review of police radio traffic from the night of the shooting. Multiple deputies converged onto the 13200 block of Italian Cypress Trail and found Esqueda with a wound to his head. He was rushed to Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital — about 11 miles west of the shooting — in the back of another deputy’s vehicle. He did not survive.

Deputy Fernando Esqueda. Esqueda was fatally shot in an apparent ambush while responding to a call July 10.

Harris County Sheriff's Office

The deputy, who had been on the phone with a detective at the time of the shooting, likely never had a chance to return fire, Gonzalez said.

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Police initially identified Palmer as the only known suspect in the shooting, but the arrest Saturday of Francis, 26, showed otherwise. Like Palmer, prosecutors charged Francis with capital murder of a police officer but also tampering with evidence over accusations he attempted to get rid of guns used in the deputy's killing.

Palmer and Francis both live on the nearby Blue Wonder Lane within three houses of each other, where Esqueda was shot, court records show. Gonzalez described the two men as having a "social relationship."

Francis told investigators he saw Palmer shoot a gun into a truck "numerous times" and that Palmer then handed him two guns and told him to get rid of them, according to court documents. Francis tried to get another person to dispose of the firearms, described by prosecutors as a handgun and a Mini Draco, a type of semi-automatic pistol.

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Records gleaned from Francis' phone showed he might have tried selling the Draco, according to court documents.

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Francis is being held without bail on the capital murder charge until a judge could rule on his bail conditions, which could happen Wednesday at his first appearance in court. Prosecutors requested a proof-evident hearing in his case as well, court documents show.

A magistrate ordered Francis held on \$500,000 bail on the tampering charge.

Francis is unemployed and takes care of an 8-year-old child, a public defender said at a probable cause hearing.

'The world is upside down'

The family, who declined to comment, quickly gathered in a jury room and were joined by District Attorney Kim Ogg after Palmer's court appearance.

Ogg said many of the relatives plan to return to court Wednesday for Francis' appearance.

The death penalty, she continued, would be considered in Palmer's case, as happens in all cases involving those charged with capital murder in the death of a police officer. Prosecutors must voice their intent to seek death as a punishment in order to hold a defendant without bail until the outcome of the case, she said.

"We've given notice to the court that we will be seeking (death) and that's why we've asked for a proof-evident hearing," Ogg said. "In reality. This is a process and things can change."

Ogg reflected on the chain of events that started at the pizza parlor and led to Esqueda's death.

"All because somebody didn't get their pizza to look like the picture of the pizza at Little Caesars," Ogg continued. "The world is upside down when law enforcement officers are dying over such trivia."



Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg speaks the media next to Sheriff Ed Gonzalez following the court appearance of Ronald Palmer, a man accused in the shooting death of Harris County Sheriff's Office Deputy Fernando Esqueda, on Monday, July 15, 2024 in Houston.

Elizabeth Conley/Staff Photographer
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