

December 3, 2010

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**Re: Request to Investigate Pattern or Practice of Misconduct by
Seattle Police Department**

JESSE WING
BOARD PRESIDENT

KATHLEEN TAYLOR
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Mr. Perez and Ms. Durkan,

The American Civil Liberties Union of Washington and the community organizations listed below request that the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice (DOJ) open a pattern or practice investigation into multiple incidents of excessive force by the Seattle Police Department (SPD), particularly force used against persons of color.

Recent Incidents of Excessive Force

Over the past 18 months, the City of Seattle has witnessed a series of incidents involving Seattle police officers inflicting physical violence on city residents. In at least one case, a death resulted (a matter that may already be the subject of a DOJ criminal investigation). In each case, the use of physical force appeared unnecessary and excessive. We believe a DOJ investigation is now warranted.

Following are brief descriptions of incidents that have raised concerns that lead us to make this request.

June 11, 2009: Daniel Macio Saunders, an African-American man, was released from jail due to a bureaucratic mistake. Mr. Saunders did not know that he should not have been released, and went to the Seattle Police evidence unit to pick up his belongings. A police video shows Mr. Saunders opening the door to the evidence room lobby to admit three uniformed Seattle police officers. Immediately upon entry, the officers tackled Mr. Saunders, kicked his face and, for several minutes, administered blows to various parts of his body with their batons.¹

News articles describing the incident state that the officers inflicted blows to Saunders' body with their flashlights and fists and used a Taser in "touch mode" several times on him.ⁱⁱ Saunders has filed a lawsuit as a result of this incident. The Seattle Police Department's internal investigation found the officers to be exonerated and ruled their conduct was lawful.

April 17, 2010: Seattle police officers stopped a Latino man they believed might be a suspect in a robbery south of Lake Union. They ordered the man to lie face down on the ground while they continued their investigation. The man complied. Video shows that while the man was lying prone on the sidewalk, an officer kicked him in the face and threatened to beat the "Mexican piss" out of him.ⁱⁱⁱ Another officer stomped on his legs as still more officers looked on. Shortly thereafter he was released from the scene.^{iv}

April 24, 2010: One of the same officers involved in the April 17, 2010 incident arrested a young man after a bar fight. The man was handcuffed and placed in the back of a patrol car where, he claims, the officer repeatedly choked him. Unfortunately, the in-car video camera that should have recorded the activity in the back of the car was not activated.^v We include this incident because it appears to be another example of excessive force and because we believe DOJ should investigate whether other individuals have suffered assaults by police officers when the in-car video cameras have not been activated.

June 14, 2010 and earlier jaywalking incidents: An SPD officer saw several young people jaywalking near Franklin High School. The officer confronted a 17-year-old African-American girl. Video of the incident shows that after she put her hands on him, the officer punched the girl in the face.^{vi}

Another incident in 2009 also started with a jaywalking stop and ended up with a lawsuit for excessive force after the teenager who was confronted by police suffered a broken nose and concussion. The incident was also captured on video.^{vii}

Four different police auditors for Seattle have noted that simple jaywalking stops too often result in physical confrontations between police and citizens, and they have called upon the SPD to take steps to reduce such incidents. Despite the auditors' calls since 2004 for improved training and supervision to de-escalate such situations, confrontations over jaywalking stops, particularly those involving persons of color, have not ceased.^{viii}

August 30, 2010: A Seattle police officer shot and killed John T. Williams, a man who belonged to a First Nations Tribe. Williams was well known in the community as a wood carver. The in-car video camera from the officer's car shows Williams crossing the street in the crosswalk. He held a piece of wood and his 3-inch carving knife in his hand. The officer stopped his car, got out and yelled at Williams to drop the knife, but it is unclear if Williams heard the officer since he is partially deaf. So far, no evidence has come to light of any aggressive or threatening act by Williams toward the officer or anyone else, and there is physical evidence indicating Williams was not facing the officer when he was shot multiple times. The press has reported that the SPD Firearms Review Board made a preliminary finding that the shooting was unjustified, and an inquest is pending.^{ix}

October 18, 2010: A convenience store's surveillance camera shows an African-American teenager entering the store, putting his hands up and waiting. The youth's name has not been reported since he is a juvenile. A non-uniformed Seattle police officer enters the store and kicks the youth hard in the groin area, causing him to fall to the ground. While the youth is on the ground, the plainclothes officer kicks him several times more with blows apparently aimed at the youth's head. A uniformed officer enters, pushes the kicking officer to the side, and immediately handcuffs the unresisting youth.^x

This Pattern of Violent Incidents Warrants a Department of Justice Investigation

The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, 42 U.S.C. 14141 ("Section 14141"), authorizes the United States Attorney General to conduct investigations to eliminate a "pattern or practice of conduct by law enforcement officers ... that deprives persons of rights, privileges, or immunities secured or protected by the Constitution or laws of the United States." The DOJ's website explains that the statute "prohibits law enforcement agencies from regularly violating existing constitutional protections against police misconduct, such as excessive force, false arrests, unreasonable searches or seizures, and intentional racial or ethnic discrimination."


The ACLU asks that DOJ initiate an investigation under this statute because the disturbing incidents of excessive force inflicted on residents of Seattle, and especially on persons of color, have continued despite actions and statements from the Police Department and City leadership. The officers appear to inflict injury out of anger at the individual rather than the need to protect public safety. Distrust of the police by communities of color grows as a result, and it becomes harder for the Seattle Police Department to do its job of keeping all Seattle residents safe.

The DOJ is well-equipped to investigate the cause of these repeated incidents. The investigation should determine why the police initiated or escalated the confrontations; whether and why the officers perceived a threat from certain individuals; whether officers view the use of force differently when they are confronting a person of color; why the officers chose not to use de-escalation tactics in responding to perceived law violations in order to avoid the use of violence; whether SPD employees who witness excessive force promptly reported it; whether the SPD supervisors promptly and properly gathered the evidence and fully investigated the allegation of use of force; and what caused contradictions between the initial statements of the officers involved and other evidence.

All residents of Seattle deserve equal and professional treatment by police officers. But these highly publicized incidents have further eroded an already strained relationship between the Seattle Police Department and parts of our community. The Seattle Police Department has compounded the feelings of distrust when its spokespeople attempt to justify the involved officers' actions based on factors unknown to the officers at the time of the incidents, such as a person's criminal history, mental illness, or substance abuse. For example, the Department's spokesperson acknowledged that it was unknown whether the officer involved knew Mr. Williams, yet he commented shortly after the shooting that Mr. Williams had been "arrested many times."^{xi}

We request that the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice promptly investigate whether the Seattle Police Department has engaged in a pattern or practice of violations of civil rights by using unnecessary and excessive force against the residents of Seattle in violation of federal law. The DOJ has the authority and tools to investigate these troubling incidents; to evaluate the SPD's policies, practices, training and supervision; and to provide technical assistance, advice and guidance to the City of Seattle. Through such an investigation, the DOJ can significantly improve equality, fairness, and public safety throughout Seattle.

Sincerely,


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Executive Director
ACLU of Washington

Michele Wong, President
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December 3, 2010

Page 5

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Alison Eisinger, Executive Director
Seattle/King County Coalition on
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Janeen Comenote, Development Officer
United Indians of All Tribes

Jesus Rodriguez, Co-Chair
Trusted Advocates Association

Endnotes:

ⁱ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWpwXj-x6go>

ⁱⁱ http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2013276590_arrestsuit28m.html
http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2010264603_saunders13m.html

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.kirotv.com/news/23479966/detail.html>

^{iv} http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2011917010_opa21m.html
http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2011894195_coalition19m.html

^v <http://www.kirotv.com/news/25687185/detail.html>

^{vi} http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/theblotter/2012141464_--from_times_staff_reporter_11.html

^{vii}

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2012663534_apwajaywalklawsuit.html

^{viii} [OPA Civilian Auditor's Report for April – December, 2003, page 14](#)
[OPA Civilian Auditor's Report for October 2005-March 2006, pages 9-10](#)
[OPA Civilian Auditor's Report for October 2006 to March 2007, page 5](#)
[OPA Civilian Auditor's Report for June 2009 to November 2009, page 8](#)

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2012136804_coppunch17m.html

^{ix}

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2013443640_policeshooting16m.html

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2013385604_policeshooting10m.html

^x http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2013465458_copkick19m.html

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2013462005_apuspolicickickvideo.html

^{xi} http://www.seattlepi.com/local/426004_police01.html