



## THE BLACK POLICE EXPERIENCE

March 8, 2021

### **The Black Police Experience Unequivocally Calls for Fair and Equitable Action In the Case of Lieutenant Sonya (Lancaster) Zollicoffer of the Prince George's Police Department (Maryland)**

**The Black Police Experience** has been following, with the highest concern, the case of Lieutenant Sonya (Lancaster) Zollicoffer of the Prince George's County Police Department in Maryland (PGCPD). Lt. Zollicoffer recently had administrative charges sustained against her, related to what is a continuing pattern of disparate treatment against Black and Hispanic officers in the police department.

Lt. Zollicoffer was assigned a complaint of excessive force when she was a sergeant in the Internal Affairs Division. The case resulted in her charging two White officers with excessive force in an encounter with a Black driver. When she left the division as a lieutenant, she discovered that seven minutes of the video camera footage of the incident went missing from the investigative file. When she attempted to find out what happened to the missing video, Lt. Zollicoffer was administratively charged with violating department policy. On Monday, March 1, during an administrative hearing, the charges were sustained. The next phase of the process is discipline, decided by Interim Police Chief Hector Velez. Velez was the Assistant Chief in charge of the Internal Affairs Division when Lt. Zollicoffer was charged. We feel that it is a conflict of interest for him to decide discipline in her case. Further, there is no word as to what is being done about the mysteriously missing video evidence in the excessive force complaint.

Prince George's County is the accused in a federal lawsuit, filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Maryland and the Washington Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. The lawsuit is filed on behalf of several Black and Hispanic PGCPD officers and is a result of what the plaintiffs say are discriminatory practices within the agency. These officers are represented by the United Black Police Officers Association (UBPOA) and the Hispanic National Law Enforcement Association (HNLEA). Lt. Zollicoffer is a plaintiff in the lawsuit. Allegations made by the officers are not new, as over the years other Black and Brown police officers have raised concerns about bias-based policing and disparate treatment, only to be ignored or to have their complaints unresolved, or to become the recipients of retaliation.

Early in Lt. Zollicoffer's career, she sought assistance after being sexually assaulted by a fellow officer. No solid steps were taken to resolve the issue, and instead of finding protection, Lt. Zollicoffer was made to work in an environment that allowed that officer to go unpunished. He is still a member of the police department. The hypersexualization and accusations of misconduct of Black women is historically a frequently recurring theme in policing. It is a barrier to the police reform changes asked for by the community. As an officer who has served honorably, Lt. Zollicoffer deserves much more than repeated trauma, and the community deserves much more than sexual predators in police uniform.

The lack of ethical conduct at PGCPD is documented not only by the lawsuit, but also by an independent report by Michael E. Graham, a former senior officer with the Los Angeles, California Sheriff's Department. Retired Montgomery County, Maryland police chief, J. Thomas Manger, responded with a report on behalf of the county, largely refuting the allegations of the aggrieved officers. Manger is a long-time acquaintance of former Prince George's County police chief Hank Stawinski. Stawinski recently oversaw the PGCPD, only retiring after the Graham report was released. The community is concerned about the objectivity of the Manger report, considering the relationship between the former chiefs of two neighboring counties.

Black and Hispanic officers are tired of the "bad apple" theory, as there is no commitment to rid most police departments of corrupt officers. In Prince George's County, the police department has nurtured an entire racially fed bad apple orchard, with no one willing to pick the bad apples from the bunch. Most of the recommendations of the recent Prince George's County Police Reform Task Force could be helpful, but it remains to be seen whether there will be competent outside leadership to ensure the recommendations are implemented. Relying on the same old police officials doing the same old thing is not progress, and it does not solve the lack of fairness, impartiality, or transparency that serves to feed continued bias and racial trauma within the police department and in the outside community.

We demand that the officials of the Prince George's County Police Department treat Lieutenant Sonya Zollicoffer with the fairness and equity which she deserves in her administrative case. We also expect that Prince George's County acknowledges and commits to ending the police department's unconstitutional pattern and practice of discrimination and retaliation against officers of color, and that those officers be treated with respect, human dignity, and justice going forward. We will monitor the situation.

**The Black Police Experience** works in partnership with current and former law enforcement, police researchers, and grassroots community advocates in advancing the cause of social justice and police reform. The mission is achieved through education on the history of policing as it affects the Black and other vulnerable communities.

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