

The police are the “face of the community” and must continue to provide good “customer service”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Police August 14, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police* 

[Public Safety Committee meeting video here](#)

Public Safety Committee chair Colon wrapped up the round of Council questions for the police.

Councilman Colon confirmed that though a weapon was drawn by officers 25 times during the period of the report, there were no discharges. He also was interested in the proportion of police contacts that resulted from calls as opposed to officer initiated. And he recognized the practical difficulty in training since you can't, like the military, rotate officers out of service. The full force is needed 24/7.

Gadfly was a bit surprised about this last point, since Councilman Colon seemed to be acquiescing to the impossibility of doing the amount of training necessary. On the other hand, Gadfly remembers Councilwoman Negrón saying from her previous work experience that it is possible to get the necessary training in.

Councilman Colon then asked about how resident complaints against officers are handled, and that portion of his conversation with the Chief might be of general interest. Here it is, a 4-minute subset of the above audio.

Audio Files not available in this archive

The Chief said that complaints can be made 3 ways: in person at the station, by phone to the station, an email to the Chief (see **[Issue with an Officer](#)**). More than one person has told Gadfly that they tried but were unable to make complaints by phone. Rather they were told they must come in and fill out a form, which, for some people, would be very intimidating. In fact, one of the commenters later in the meeting said exactly this. Somebody should tell the Chief that the desk sergeants need some re-training on this issue.

Complaints against officers are handled internally by Capt. Kott's Professional Standards unit, except that complaints regarding use of force go to the District Attorney, and a small group of the Brass adjudicates the complaints.

But Gadfly doesn't feel Councilman Colon pushed far enough in his questions about citizen complaints, especially given the national circumstances that occasioned this meeting. In Gadfly's opinion Councilman Colon didn't ask about the substantial stuff

First, what exactly were people complaining about? That would be important to know. Seems to Gadfly that the department should start tracking that. Gadfly thinks it would be essential to have a breakdown of the nature of the complaints into categories. Might we find, for instance, charges of lack of courtesy, intimidation, profiling, etc.

Second, how many of the complaints were "founded," how many "unfounded"? The department investigates itself. What are the results of doing so? And how should we feel about that. We need to know more about the discipline process — what kind of discipline was meted out? Is there an appeal process? Is the FOP involved? This line of questioning would have gotten us into some talk about citizen review boards.

Third, Gadfly has wondered if the complainant is notified of the disposition of the investigation of the complaint. Nobody seems to think about asking that. But that feedback would seem to be essential to establishing trust with the community, and trust between the police force and the community is what is under the microscope these days.

Wouldn't it be interesting to know how the little department committee handled this complaint and how commonplace this kind of thing is.

POLICE DEPARTMENT
INTERNAL AFFAIRS
DIVISION COMPLAINT FORM

COMPLAINANTS NAME, ADDRESS AND TELEPHONE:

HOME PHONE: _____ WORK PHONE: _____

DATE AND TIME OF INCIDENT:

Wednesday, January 15, 2020

DESCRIPTION OF INCIDENT:

Our son _____ was stopped for an expired inspection sticker by officers _____ and _____ on Polk street in Bethlehem at 1:45 pm. One of the officers stated he smelled weed in the car, and asked _____ several times when was the last time he smoked. The officer searched our son, his book bag, and his female friend's book bag, and our car. _____ said that the officer accused our family of smoking weed. The officers told our son that he was nervous because he was afraid that they were going to find something in the car. Our son told the officer that he was nervous because he's never had an interaction with police. _____ said that one of the officers said to the other that they should get the dog to search our car. He intimidated and humiliated _____ in front of many of his peers. Our son was obviously not impaired, the officer found nothing in the car, or on _____'s person. _____ or the car upon closer inspection smelled of marijuana, otherwise the officer would have had grounds to hold _____ but rather after finding nothing _____ was let go. The officer was obviously lying or grossly mistaken. He did not smell weed in the car, no one in the family smokes anything. We are in the car daily and would know if someone had smoked in the car. The officer approached my son biased either from past experience or prejudice. He wrongly concluded our son, an African American teenager smoked marijuana. It is evident the officer intentionally targeted our son. The Bethlehem Police Department has been negligent in admitting the officer's wrongdoing. The officers and the Bethlehem Police Department need to apologize to _____ for the emotional distress and humiliation that was inflicted upon him as a result of this incident. A refusal to do so would demonstrate a departmental culture to intimidate rather than to protect and serve. As a result of this incident _____ no longer trusts that police officers have integrity. Additionally, he was embarrassed and made to look like a criminal in front of other teenagers and school officials. We demand a written and an in-person apology in order to bring reconciliation to this matter.

It has been explained to me that Section 4906 of the Pennsylvania Crimes Code is False Reports to Law Enforcement Agencies and is a misdemeanor of the 3rd Degree if I file a fictitious report.

Signature: _____

To Gadfly, Councilman Colon also missed an opportunity for interesting relevant discussion on the topic of body cameras. We learned that one of the police bosses is tasked with picking two (I think) bodycams at random each month to review. Why not ask that reviews of interactions with Blacks and Latinx be reviewed. That's what we're interested in. That's why we were holding this meeting. It would seem that in bodycam footage there is a treasure trove of evidence about interactions with POC. Maybe there's some prohibition against doing this? Reminds Gadfly of classroom visitation by the department chair during his teaching years, a practice that he hated.

Concluding his comments, Councilman Colon found reassuring the "quality assurance protocols" like the dual accreditations, like the body cam reviews, that are in place and hoped the "checks and balances" would continue. But then he went forward to play off the Chief's earlier comments that you can find racists in every profession. Here's that subset of the entire discussion that's valuable to hear:

Audio Files not available in this archive

Councilman Colon pointed out that though there might be racists in every walk of life that police have a special power over us that others don't, and that, without implying that there are discriminatory practices within the department, the numbers are what they are and conversation needs to continue. Councilman Colon stressed the need for reassurance that there is "equal application of the law" and the need to continue and expand programs that will give officers "the depth of knowledge" to handle the different situations well. We need to remember that a 911 call is "a call for help."

Councilman Colon ended with profuse appreciation for the service the police provide and talked about what happens when there is simple "police contact" before there is any question of use of force. The police are the "face of the community, "customer service" is "at the forefront of what we do." "Simple customer service" — which the police department does a good job of. "Perception starts at contact." Each officer must "reassure the public that they have full faith" in the services provided by the police. Councilman Colon gave thanks to the Chief, Deputy Chief, and Captain for continuing to monitor that.

This wraps up Gadfly's review of Council comments on the police force statistics in the first part of the meeting. Time to look back. What are you thinking? What part or parts struck you most? Gadfly invites you in to the conversation.