POLICE - COMMUNITY COMPLAINT OBSERVATION PROGRAM ANNOUNCED

ST. LOUIS POLICE BOARD REJECTS PROPOSAL

A report on St. Louis Police complaint practices and on a proposal for complaint-observation program was released by the St. L.C.L.C. on June 2. Prepared by Dr. William M. Landau and Mr. Jules Gerard of the Police-Community Relations committee of St. L.C.L.C. and Mr. Ivan Schenberg, legal counsel, the report describes efforts by the Civil Liberties Committee to set up a meaningful citizen’s complaint procedure for police practices.

The report states that the purpose of the police-community complaint observation program (PCCOP) is to "initiate a plan that will continually improve the confidence, understanding, and trust of the citizens of St. Louis in their policemen and their police department." Essentially the PCCOP is a system to provide a neighborhood ombudsman-like observer and a legal advisor to help an offended citizen file a complaint and to overview the adequacy of police investigation and judgement.

The recommendation was the result of many meetings and consultations with authorities and representatives of civil rights groups, the Legal Aid Bureau and the Human Development Corporation. The program includes detailed procedures for filing complaints, for the conduct of police investigations, for the role of and responsibility of the observer, for the qualifications of the observer, and for the disposition of the complaint reports. Final full responsibility for all police policies and actions under the plan, including the division of inspection, is retained by the Board of Police Commissioners. However, the preamble to the program notes that "complaining citizens must have confidence that investigations are prompt, thorough, and fair, and that action taken on their complaints and requests are impartially reviewed by the Board of Commissioners."

The program was presented in its entirety to the Police Board including Mayor Cervantes on April 5, 1967. The report states, "we have been told directly that police officers find the program completely unacceptable and that they are unwilling and apparently uninterested in providing any alternative to the present program exactly as it is. Although we suggested that we would be glad to return to the Police Board to discuss the development of a program which would serve the goals we are trying to meet, we have been informed the Police Board has dropped the matter."

"A major objection seemed to be that the Observer would not be directly responsible to the Police Department, and that if he were not a person of integrity, the Police Department would have no way to control him." Other objections included the "threat of adverse publicity (to the Police Board) where decisions were considered unwise policy. It was also objected that PCCOP would cause delay in Board actions."

The St. L.C.L.C. report included two specific cases of police actions and the handling of complaints filed in regard to these incidents. One case involved the shooting of Timothy Walsh on October 13, 1966. The report concluded: "For a case of an alleged major offense against a citizen, our review indicates a confusing overlap of responsibility between the Inspector's Office and the Homicide Division, confusion about the proper public role of the Inspector's Office, the Coroner's court, and the Police Board in coming to a decision about an offense, and generally confusing lines of responsibility in particular aspects of handling the case. Thus, the Inspector's office serves not only the expected investigative and disciplinary roles, but also performs, in various ways, the function of a judiciary, a police policy advisory committee, police officer defenders, and sometime prosecutors. We find it especially significant, in view of changes proposed, that when the investigation of this case was challenged, the Inspector's Office volunteered to have interrogation witnessed not only by a neutral party, the Civil Liberties Committee Counsel, but even by the complaining citizen. We submit that this action confirms our view that such an open practice is the most powerful method for developing confidence in the police force."

In the second case, complaints were filed for an alleged beating of a boy by a police officer on January 15, 1966. In discussing this case, the report concludes: "The case illustrates the awkward inflexibility of the present reporting system and shows clearly the operational lack of responsibility by the whole Police Board for final disposition. The

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