



LAWYERS' COMMITTEE  
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND  
ECONOMIC JUSTICE  
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August 24, 2017

Mayor Domenic Sarno  
Springfield City Hall  
36 Court Street  
Springfield, MA 01103

Police Commissioner John Barbieri  
Springfield Police Department  
130 Pearl Street  
Springfield, MA 01105

**Re: Investigation of Officer Conrad Lariviere's Facebook Post**

Dear Mayor Sarno and Commissioner Barbieri:

We respectfully write to you to express our concerns surrounding the Facebook comments made by Springfield Police Officer Conrad Lariviere in connection with the racial violence that recently erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia. Officer Lariviere's comments are profoundly harmful to both the Springfield Police Department (SPD) and the Springfield community. We recognize and appreciate the comments made by Mayor Sarno and SPD's response to the posts. We are also encouraged by the initiation of an internal investigation into the incident. These steps are a good start, but more needs to be done. Because of the damaging nature of the comments and the threat to public safety, we request that the SPD and the City provide comprehensive cultural competency training for SPD officers; adopt a plan to increase diversity at the SPD; and commit to making the investigation of Officer Lariviere open, public and transparent. Adopting this comprehensive package of solutions will help to adequately address Officer Lariviere's misconduct and prevent future incidents of racial insensitivity.

Today, our country is in the midst of an unprecedented national conversation on race relations. This conversation dramatically escalated over the past two weeks as white supremacists rallied in Charlottesville, Virginia. We saw racial hate and violence in Charlottesville where - in the midst of a protest over issues of deep national concern - a young woman was killed and dozens were injured.

We are, therefore, deeply troubled by the public comments made by Officer Lariviere on Facebook in connection with the Charlottesville crisis. In his comments, under an article describing the rally and the anti-racist protestor being fatally struck by a vehicle, Officer Lariviere wrote: "Hahahaha love this, maybe people shouldn't block roads." This endorsement of unjustified violence is reprehensible. It also improperly politicizes the police. It makes law enforcement's focus politics, rather than safety.

Comprehensive cultural competency training for SPD officers is essential if the harm caused by Officer Lariviere's comments is to be fully addressed. It cannot be overstated how damaging comments such as those made by Officer Lariviere are to the relationship between police and the communities they serve. In mocking the death of a person who was protesting white supremacy, Officer Lariviere appeared to be supporting those who committed racial violence in Charlottesville. When community members see comments like this it erodes trust in SPD and undermines community policing efforts. As a result, community members are less likely to call 911 in the event of an emergency or to cooperate with investigations. Cultural competency training would help rebuild this trust. It can help to protect the SPD from potential liability that can spring from Officer Lariviere's comments. Such comments can be evidence of racial bias and can potentially expose the police department to civil liability for racial profiling or other discriminatory practices.<sup>1</sup> Claims for discrimination and misconduct ruin community faith in their police departments and can pour millions of scarce taxpayer dollars into litigation.<sup>2</sup> This potential exposure to liability and the damage done to community trust could be addressed by instituting cultural competency trainings.

A plan for increasing diversity in the SPD is also crucial to help address Officer Lariviere's comments and the resulting fallout. The trouble caused by Officer Lariviere is heightened in Springfield because it is one of the Commonwealth's most diverse cities (the last census shows that 22.3% of the population is Black and 38.8% is Latino).<sup>3</sup> When Officer Lariviere appeared to be supporting the actions of the white supremacists at the rally in Charlottesville it cast a pall over residents of color in Springfield. It became unclear whether SPD would adequately be able to protect minority residents. As the Department of Justice noted in their October 2016 report on diversity in police forces – in diverse communities in particular, it is important to have a police force that reflects the make-up of the community it serves.<sup>4</sup> This facilitates better communication, increases trust, and leads to better policing. Continuing to work towards a SPD that reflects the diverse community it serves will go a long way towards addressing the problems raised by the Facebook posts. This is why it is essential that the City and the SPD take proactive steps to further diversify the police force by adopting a comprehensive plan for recruiting, hiring and promoting officers of color.

Finally, there is great public interest in Officer Lariviere's comments and in the outcome of this investigation. We urge you to make the investigation open, public and transparent. Transparency, along with implementing the recommendations discussed above will go a long way

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<sup>1</sup> See Castro v. Beecher, 459 F.2d 725 (1st Cir. 1972); Bolduc v. Town of Webster, 629 F. Supp. 2d 132 (D. Mass. 2009); Mandell v. County of Suffolk, 316 F.3d 368, 383 (2d Cir. 2003); see also Bennett v. City of Holyoke, 230 F. Supp. 2d 207, 223 (D. Mass. 2002), aff'd, 362 F.3d 1 (1st Cir. 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See Springfield Community Police Hearing Report 2014-2015 (noting that the city paid over 1 million dollars in judgments and settlements for police misconduct in 2014-15); see also City Employee Awarded \$10.9m in Discrimination Case, Boston Globe (Oct. 24, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau lists Springfield's population demographics as: 22.3% Black or African American; 38.8% Hispanic or Latino; and 51.8% White (U.S. Census Bureau).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, *Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement* (2016).

towards addressing the harm caused by Officer Lariviere's comments. We hope that the solution to this incident can be part of building greater trust within Springfield and bolstering the SPD's position as a department that serves the community and condemns bigotry. We are respectfully requesting a meeting with you to discuss this matter in greater detail.

Sincerely,

IVAN ESPINOZA-MADRIGAL  
Executive Director

OREN N. NIMNI  
Civil Rights Fellow

Cc: Attorney General Maura Healy  
Springfield City Council