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Hilda L. Solis
Mark Ridley-Thomas
Sheila Kuehl
Janice Hahn
Kathryn Barger

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, AGING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

3175 West Sixth Street • Los Angeles, CA 90020

Tel: 213-738-2600 • Fax 213-487-0379



wdacs.lacounty.gov

Cynthia D. Banks
Director

Otto Solórzano
Chief Deputy

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Contact: Kevin Anderson

Cell: (213) 738-2593

kanderson@css.lacounty.gov

Contact: Jasmyne Cannick

Cell: (323) 839-0216

jcannick@me.com

RELATIONS STILL STRAINED BETWEEN SOUTH LOS ANGELES RESIDENTS AND THE POLICE

L.A. County Human Relations Commission came to the city of Watts to hear from residents about their relationship with law enforcement officers.

LOS ANGELES CALIF. – Over 50 years after the 1965 Watts Rebellion and as Los Angeles approaches the 25th anniversary of the Los Angeles Civil Unrest, interactions are still strained relations between law enforcement and local communities that precipitated these events.

On Saturday, February 25, the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations held a public hearing on policing and human relations in South Los Angeles for residents of the 2nd Supervisorial District as part of a countywide Policing and Human Relations Project. The hearing was held at the Watts Labor Community Action Committee and afforded the community to share their real life experiences involving law enforcement in L.A. County.

For three hours members of the Commission listened intently as various organizations and residents of all ages offered testimony and suggestions on how to improve relations with law enforcement. The panel included **Isabelle Gunning**, President of the L.A. County Commission on Human Relations, **Dr. Melina Abdullah**, Vice-President of the Commission and Chair of its Ad-Hoc Committee on Policing and Human Relations, **Cynthia Anderson-Barker**, civil rights and criminal defense attorney, **Jarrett T.**

Barrios, American Red Cross Los Angeles Chief Executive Officer, **Ashlee Oh**, Homeless Initiative for the County of Los Angeles Consultant, **Preeti P. Kulkarni**, Chief Financial Officer for the Women's Foundation of California, **Guadalupe Montaña**, Cal State University Dominguez Hills Professor, and **Robin Toma**, Executive Director of the Commission.

“For our commission, this was a critically important opportunity to hear from the Watts and other South LA communities because it was in these communities more than 50 years ago where a crisis in police-community relations erupted in widespread violence,” **said Isabelle Gunning, President of the L.A. County Commission on Human Relations**. “With these hearings, we hope community members will come forward to speak on the issues that we need to address today if we are to have strong trust in police-community relations.”

“We have also heard about the recent reports of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents who have identified themselves as “police” when contacting L.A. residents at their home,” **said Robin Toma**, Executive Director of the Commission. “This too has caused confusion and distrust among residents and those police departments, which have policies of not inquiring about the immigration status of victims or witnesses, nor enforcing immigration laws, in order to have the trust of the immigrant community.”

Angela James, visiting Professor of Pan-African Studies at Cal State University, Los Angeles, argued that the community needs to pay more attention to issues around policing in schools as an extension of policing young people.

“Random searches inside of schools plus an increased presence of LAPD officers on buses and trains promote a real academic impact of fear that those kinds of interactions produce,” contended **Professor James**.

Among those who came out to offer testimony included civil rights attorney **Luis Carrillo** who spoke about his clients involved in an incident in Anaheim where an off-duty LAPD officer discharged his weapon after getting into an altercation with teenagers who had walked on his lawn.

“We’re concerned that over the years the chief of police promises reforms but never delivers with the reforms because the officers continue to abuse the community,” **Carrillo told the Commission**. “African-American and Latino communities are always at the bad end of justice—there is no justice. We applaud you for the work that you’re doing because it has to be done.”

In offering special testimonies on high profile cases involving law enforcement, Carrillo was joined by family members of **Wakiesha Wilson**, a 36-year-old African-American woman who was found last Easter hanging in a cell at the Los Angeles Metropolitan Detention Center, **Mitrice Richardson**, a 24-year-old woman who was found dead 11-months after she was released in the middle of night from the Malibu/Lost Hills Sheriff’s station and **Keith Burse**, a 31-year-old African-American man who was killed in 2016 by Los Angeles police.

Community groups in attendance included Black Lives Matter Los Angeles, Youth Justice Coalition and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network.

Saturday's hearing was the fourth in a series of hearings taking place throughout Los Angeles County. A final hearing is planned in order to hear from law enforcement representatives and subject matter experts. In addition to the hearings, the Commission is obtaining information about best practices and recommendations for fair policing from many sources. The results of these hearings and additional information will be combined in a report that can be used by community partners to strengthen local public safety systems.

“Los Angeles County is a huge area,” said Dr. Melina Abdullah, Vice-President of the Commission and Chair of its Ad-Hoc Committee on Policing and Human Relations. “When you talk about law enforcement agencies there are over 50 agencies in Los Angeles County. Aside from the LAPD and the Sheriff’s Department you have dozens of municipal police agencies including Inglewood, Culver City and Hawthorne. It is critically important that the public come out and tell us about their experiences so that the Commission and the County can have an accurate representation of how the community really feels about police-community relations.”

The next hearing will take place in Reseda on Sunday, March 26, 2017. For more information please visit wdacs.lacounty.gov or call (213) 738-2788.

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