

Norristown Community White Paper

Incidents of Police Harassment experienced by the Latino community

in the city of Norristown, PA

Wednesday, September 19, 2012

This document is a publication of Juntos

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Introduction

A few weeks ago leaders from the Latino community in Norristown reached out to Juntos, a Latino immigrant community led organization, to raise concerns they had about the relationship between local police, ICE, and the Latino community. Over the past couple of weeks we collected over 25 stories ranging from incidents of racial profiling of community members by the police, local police behaving as ICE officials at checkpoints, harassment of individuals on the streets, and cases of unjust detention. These are some of these stories.

We at Juntos believe that in order to have safe and trusting communities every member of that community should be allowed to live with dignity, free from fear and persecution. When the relationship between the police and the community is broken and absent of trust, we begin to create insecure communities that perpetuate violence and hate. We must stop these abuses, rebuild these relationships, and create solutions to move forward for the sake of all of us.

** Those who wish to not be identified will use an alias.*

Fernando Torres (alias)

"Shut up, you have no rights. We will send you back to your country."

Fernando Torres came to Norristown in the summer of 2010 with very little money and only two changes of clothes. One day Fernando decided to accompany 20 men who were waiting for work outside of the McDonald's on Main St. He began to have a conversation with some of the other men when suddenly all of the workers began to run in panic. Very scared and confused, Fernando started running too. Two police officers eventually caught him and threw him to the ground. Suddenly, he was on the ground with one police officer's foot on his neck and the other police officer's foot digging into his back. When he was thrown to the ground Fernando's knees hit the ground so hard his pants ripped and his knees began to bleed profusely. The palms of his hands also began to bleed and he dislocated his wrists from the fall. What really stung for Fernando weren't just the blows from the police but the humiliation he suffered when the McDonald's employees came out and began applauding the officers' behaviors. They then picked Fernando up from the ground and threw him up against the hood of the patrol car, which was sweltering from the summer heat. Both his face and hands suffered first-degree burns. Even after being treated this way, no one explained to Fernando what was happening or why they handcuffed him. Fernando did not speak any English and there was no translation of the incident. Eventually the officers asked Fernando for an ID. Fernando tried to explain to the officers that he had not committed any crime and asked them to please explain what was going on. The police then said "Shut up, you have no rights. We will send you back to your country." This response was given without ever confirming Fernando's immigration status. "They put me into the squad car and I asked them to let me go because I had not done anything wrong. They just laughed. I admit I was wrong for running but when I saw that everyone else was running I didn't understand what was happening and was afraid," said Fernando. But the officer's response was "Shut up you f*@ing Mexican. This is so you never come back. "

Angel Gonzalez

“Now people are afraid to even go into a restaurant. We are being persecuted and others are profiting from it.”

Angel Gonzalez never imagined that going to buy an order of tacos at the restaurant Mexican Paradise on Thursday, March 25, 2011, would have cost him a week of unjust detention in York County prison. Angel had just left work when he and his boss came to the restaurant to buy dinner. Suddenly, a group of ICE officers stormed the restaurant and began to demand "papers" from anyone who looked Latino. The officers allowed the white and African-American patrons to leave the restaurant without asking for any documents, as per Angel's account. There was a party happening in the basement and no one from the party was stopped or questioned. The officers then said, "I want to see your papers," so Angel pulled out his visa, showed it to the officer, and explained that he was married to an American citizen. The response was "Sorry, wrong place, wrong time," then they took Angel into custody. "They only asked the Latinos for their papers, everyone else who did not look Latino and was either in the restaurant or at the party in the basement was not asked," Angel said. They then drove him to Philadelphia without ever telling him the reason. By Saturday, March 27th, Angel was already sent to York Detention Center. Angel noticed the lack of translation services in the detention center and although he is not fluent, he speaks some English. Angel began to interpret for all the other men who were arrested with him. Angel had to pay a \$5,000 bond to get out a week later and with the inclusion of lawyer fees following the incident, this experience cost him over \$10,000. "Now people are afraid to even go into a restaurant. We are being persecuted and others are profiting from it," he said.

Gerardo Vega

"There were women and children present. Children began to cry and hug their parents just terrified. Police shouted at them to be quiet or they would send them back to Mexico."

It was wintertime in 2011 when Gerardo Vega, owner of Mexico Lindo and a legal resident of the United States, had his business bombarded by Norristown police. "The police stormed into my restaurant without any permits or warrants," said Gerardo. Police then ran into the kitchen and began to demand "papers" from the kitchen employees. They also began to ask for "papers" from patrons who were eating in the restaurant. "There were women and children present. Children began to cry and hug their parents just terrified. Police shouted at them to be quiet or they would send them back to Mexico," said Gerardo. There were about 15 people in the restaurant, including a woman who suffered from diabetes. She fainted from all the commotion and had to be sent to the hospital. The officers told him they had come to the restaurant because they were looking for someone who entered the restaurant through the back, but Gerardo and the employees who were working in the back kitchen stated that no one entered the restaurant. Since then, the restaurant has been negatively affected financially because community members are afraid to go. "Before many people would come to Norristown, but now many local establishments are losing business and are isolated. Also, this tenuous relationship between the police and the community creates violence and insecurity," said Gerardo.

Jorge Medina (alias)

"In my experience parts of Mexico are not safe, but neither is Norristown. One sees a cop and is afraid. Instead of trusting the police I would prefer to stay as far away from them as possible."

On April 30, 2012 Jorge Medina of Conshohocken, PA, went to Norristown with his brother to pay a bill. While driving he realized there was a checkpoint on Marshall Street and tried to turn around. As he turned around the police followed him and pulled them over. The police tapped on his window and the first thing the officer asked Jorge was for his "papers." Jorge, who speaks very little English, handed the officer his Mexican driver's license and his registration. According to Jorge, the police officer didn't even look at the papers and began to ask him if he had permission to be in this country. "I told him no and he told me to turn around and go where the other police officers were. I was then directed to a parking lot with many other Latinos detained by ICE agents," said Jorge. The immigration officer asked him where he lived and when he entered the country. Jorge said: "There were about 4 other gentlemen and they checked all of our fingerprints. There was an immigration officer who did speak Spanish. They held us for quite a long time and eventually let me go but my brother was told to stay. No one ever explained why some had to stay while others were let go." Jorge waited for his brother to be released on a nearby street but the officers took him. The next day he was released on an electronic bracelet. "He had no criminal record prior to this and now he has to go to court." Jorge and his brother are originally from a small town in Mexico where, according to Jorge, the cartels have taken over the streets and businesses. Jorge fears for his brother's life if he gets deported back to Mexico. "In my experience parts of Mexico are not safe, but neither is Norristown. One sees a cop and is afraid. Instead of trusting the police I would prefer to stay as far away from them as possible."

Maria Morales

"Melanie ran upstairs to see her father and when she saw him being carried away (by ICE) she tried to jump out of a window."

It was four in the afternoon on a November day in 2011 when Maria Morales and her husband got into a car accident. The other driver, who was an American, passed a stop sign and hit the Morales' car. "My husband was innocent in the accident, no one was hurt, our car was insured but even so the police took him to see if he had a criminal record. Being that he didn't have a criminal record, they let him go and told him to expect a ticket/citation in the mail." Months passed and the ticket/citation never arrived, so Maria's husband decided to go to traffic court and find out what happened. The police had written down the wrong address so they missed a court date. "My husband went to what was his second court date, had to pay a fine of \$1,600 and the judge said he would not be allowed to drive for two years," said Maria. To their surprise, months later immigration authorities came to their home asking for her husband. Four ICE officers entered violently into the house without a warrant or permission. Several relatives, including some small children, were in the house at the time; Melanie, XX and Maria's four year old daughter, was one of the children in the house. "We all began to cry we were so scared, especially the kids," recalls Maria. "They (ICE) screamed at us to shut up and threatened us that if we didn't keep quiet they would take us all." The most painful experience was at the end when officers handcuffed XX and began to take him. "Melanie ran upstairs to see her father and when she saw him being carried away (by ICE) she tried to jump out of a window." recalls Mary. Melanie has not been the same since the incident. She wakes up at night crying saying that they are going to take her dad away from her. Whenever she sees a police officer or an immigration officer, she begins to cry and scream in terror. Melanie's kindergarten teacher called Maria to ask her what happened to Melanie because she has noticed changes in her behavior. Since then Melanie has been in therapy.

Armando Medina (alias)

"Here everyone is afraid of the police"

Armando Medina works as a janitor. Earlier this month he was driving home from work when at 11:30 p.m. three patrol cars pulled him over and surrounded him. "They asked me to step out of my car and began to ask me questions. Since I did not bring my license they took my keys and they told me to walk home. The problem is that they never explained to me why they pulled me over, what I did wrong, and they never issued me a ticket." The next day Medina went to the impound lot to get his car back for a fee of \$305. This has become common practice in Norristown and many in the Latino community are often stopped by the police for no reason and end up having to pay hundreds of dollars. "Here everyone is afraid of the police," said Armando.

Adolfo Carreón (alias)

"I came here two years ago on a tourist visa and came up north to look for work in construction. I am originally from Chihuahua, Mexico, one of the most violent states in Mexico, where more and more people are dying from the drug wars. That is why I decided to stay. Also, where I am from, it is common practice to kidnap people who have been in the United States because kidnappers think you have money. I went to a party one day and a fight broke out. There were no weapons involved and I was trying to help break up the fight when the police arrived. It was very confusing. They began to ask us questions but I didn't understand anything they were saying. I didn't know how to answer any of the questions; I didn't know how to defend myself. So they arrested me. They put me on the electronic bracelet and now I am facing deportation. I have to return to Mexico and I fear for my life. "

Joanna Castañón

"They began to tell our daughter to tell the truth, to tell them we were undocumented. My daughter was terrified and through tears told them yes. Then my 9 year old son fainted."

It was late March of this year when the Castañón family, Joanna, her husband, her two sons, ages 9 and 12, their 13 year old daughter, and their dog were outside playing on their front porch. Suddenly at around 7 p.m., two Ford Explorer trucks, two police cars, and two detective vehicles showed up. The officers stormed out of their vehicles and began to point their guns at the family, including the children. "They said they came because a neighbor told them that my husband sold drugs but that's a lie. We believe that one of the neighbors we had some history with called the police." Neither of the parents spoke English so the cops turned to Daniela, their 13 year old daughter. "They began to tell our daughter to tell the truth, to tell them we were undocumented. My daughter was terrified and through tears told them yes. Then my 9 year old son fainted." While they handcuffed her husband, Joanna asked where they were taking him and why he was being arrested. They simply replied that she would get a phone call the next day informing her of where her husband was being held. "They took my husband to the borough and strip searched him. The next morning he was taken to a courtroom on Main Street, he didn't even get a chance to go before a judge and they didn't let me see him. The next day he was taken to the immigration detention center in Philadelphia. At this point, we were still not told why he (my husband) had been detained and no one was giving us any information," said Joanna. Joanna was so desperate to just know where her husband was that she found herself a lawyer just so she could locate him. He is now on the electronic bracelet and is facing deportation. The most notable damage this situation has caused has been to Joanna's three children who are now receiving counseling. "My oldest daughter simply doesn't talk about it. My 12 year old son talks about weapons frequently and how the police pointed guns at us. My 9 year old is suffering through the most serious trauma, he cannot see a police car or a police officer without screaming or crying," Joanna said.

Community Recommendations

- We ask that the Norristown Police Department immediately stop racial profiling community members and asking for “papers.” There is no law in the state of Pennsylvania that allows for this, and it is a clear violation of peoples’ civil and human rights.
- We ask that local checkpoints not be used as immigration checkpoints.
- We ask that the Norristown Police Department develop a clear process -accessible to community members in our own language and without fear of deportation -for reporting cases of abuse, harassment, and racial profiling. Fearing the police does not bring order to a community; rather, it brings disorder and insecurity which, in turn, becomes a public safety issue.
- We ask the Norristown Police Department to meet with community leaders and allies on a monthly basis to allow for a deeper level of trust to be obtained between both the community and local police officials.
- We ask that these incidents and any other incidents of abuse, harassment, and/or racial profiling be investigated, and that proper disciplinary actions be undertaken.
- We ask that the Norristown Police Department undergo training on how to best work and build with Latino and immigrant communities.
- We ask that the information of family members detained be released to loved ones as soon as possible to avoid confusion and fear in the community. Families have a right to know where their loved ones are located.
- Almost 1 in every 3 people in Norristown is Latino and we ask that the Norristown Police District support hiring practices that allow the force to be reflective of that population in race and language.