

ACLU: Data shows checkpoints mostly target minorities

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

The American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina (ACLU-NC) is probing whether or not driver's license checkpoints set up by the Winston-Salem Police Department are unfairly targeting minority communities.

ACLU-NC Racial Justice Fellow Raul Pinto spoke about the organization's ongoing investigation last Thursday at a meeting of the newly-formed Forsyth County Hispanic American Democrats at the local Democratic Party headquarters.

Pinto is looking into the use of checkpoints, or the systematic stopping of drivers by police to check their licenses, in cities across North Carolina to see if they are being concentrated in minor-

ity areas, including areas with large Hispanic populations.

Many of the local black and Hispanic residents who attended the meeting reported seeing many checkpoints in their communities.

"Checkpoints were occurring multiple times a week, right in the same location and actually getting people coming and going from their homes," said Pinto, referring to local complaints.

A 2006 law eliminated the ability of undocumented immigrants to get a N.C. driver's license. A year later, ACLU-NC said it started getting complaints from Hispanics across the state that the driver's license checkpoints

were being held in front of their homes and businesses. Some Hispanic drivers also complained that at checkpoints, Caucasian drivers were being waved through while minority drivers were asked to produce their licens-



Forsyth County Hispanic Democrats listen to a presentation from the ACLU.



Raul Pinto

Photos by Todd Luck

es. Such complaints sounded familiar to those on hand for the meeting.

"I work at Winston-Salem State University, and we have lots of students who live close to Martin Luther King and also Reynolds Park Road and also Waughtown and we have daily checkpoints, checkpoints, checkpoints," said one attendee.

Pinto said, according to state law, the checkpoint locations are supposed to be "random or statically indicated" and not put in the same place repeatedly. He also said that the method used to check cars must be systematic, like checking every car or

every third car. Neither the location of the checkpoint or the drivers checked can be determined based on race or ethnicity.

"We want to work with the Winston-Salem Police Department and try to change the policy that's currently in place and try to see if the check points can be placed around the city evenly," said Pinto, who would also like police officers to fill out a more thorough checkpoint form, similar to what highway patrol officers use when conducting a checkpoint.

Pinto said the WSPD has been forthcoming with the information they have, supplying the records of 330

checkpoints conducted between June 23, 2010 and May 31, 2011 and performing its own review of the checkpoint concerns. Pinto said he's still confirming the information he was given, but has found "most of the locations have been in minority neighborhoods."

Pinto said checkpoints in North Carolina are probably not related to federal programs that enforce immigration laws, since many of the checkpoint complaints the agency has received predate such laws.

In an email to The Chronicle, WSPD Chief Scott Cunningham declined

to comment until the WSPD finished its own review.

"We are not interviewing about the topic at this time," said Cunningham in an email request for answers to the ACLU's concerns. "We are still reviewing the information and researching the ACLU's concerns. Once we have completed our review, we will be more than glad to talk about the facts."

City Council Member James Taylor stopped by the meeting after Pinto spoke, to hear concerns from residents. The Waughtown Street area, which has a large population of Hispanics, is in Taylor's Southeast Ward. Waughtown also was the local neighborhood with the most complaints about checkpoints, Pinto said.

Taylor, who is vice-chair of the City Council Public Safety Committee, plans to bring the issue up in his next meeting with Cunningham. He said though he feels safer personally when he sees police checkpoints, he hopes they are being implemented evenly throughout the city.

"If it's an issue, I'll help to address that issue with the chief," said Taylor.

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