

Justice department's probe into Alamance County Sheriff's Office causes county strife

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Managing Editor

The U.S. Department of Justice investigators recently visited Alamance County Sheriff's Office employees and Alamance County residents, continuing the department's inquiry into the sheriff's office for "discriminatory policing and unconstitutional searches and seizures."

Alejandro Miyar, spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Justice, said the department could not comment on an open investigation, but the sheriff's office was cooperating.

The allegations of discriminatory policing were against Latinos, he said.

The investigation has caused heated discussion among county leaders and advocacy groups.

Fairness Alamance, a group that disagrees with Sheriff Terry Johnson's enforcement of the immigration law, 287(g), has openly supported the justice department's investigation.

Fairness Alamance issued press releases asking Alamance County residents to participate in the investigation and "providing relevant information will lead to a more open, honest and accountable implementation of 287(g) program."

The press release asks residents who "feel targeted" by the sheriff's office to come forward and speak to justice department officials.

Individuals in the group have worked to make their voices heard on the immigration issue. Three unnamed members of the organization visited Alamance Community College, uninvited and without permission from the proper school administration, to speak at English as a second language classes.

The full group did not endorse these meetings, said David Blair, communications chair for Alamance Fairness.

Blair spoke as a private citizen during the Aug. 16 Alamance County Commissioners meeting and called the county commissioners' response to the

investigation "downright disgraceful." After the meeting, Blair said Alamance County Commissioner Bill Lashley threatened him.

"The commissioners were not happy to hear from me," Blair said. "Bill Lashley lost his temper and accused me of being a radical trying to overthrow the U.S. government."

The commissioner allegedly issued a string of obscenities toward Blair and threatened him physically. Lashley denied the altercation and said he had five witnesses, including Alamance County Commissioner Tim Sutton, with him after the meeting.

Blair approached Lashley after the meeting, complained and "started causing a fuss," said Lashley.

During the commissioners' meeting Blair has a right to voice his opinion during the meeting, Lashley said, but afterward he didn't want to hear Blair's opinion.

"He is a disgrace to the American system in my opinion," Lashley said.

Previous groups have also expressed concern with the sheriff's enforcement of 287(g).

The ACLU

In 2009, the American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina requested thousands of public records regarding 287(g).

In Sheriff Spokesperson Randy Jones' press release he wrote the ACLU reviewed the documents and "did not reveal any wrongdoing on the part of the Alamance County Sheriff's Office."

Katherine Parker, legal director for the state branch of the ACLU, said that is not true.

"I don't know why they are spreading this falsehood," Parker said. "We never told the sheriff we were not concerned. I don't know where their rationale is for this."

The ACLU, Parker said, has expressed concerns of racial profiling and

checkpoints in predominantly Latino areas.

"We do have these concerns, and we have heard complaints," she said. "The records we have been reviewing suggest (the arrests) are disproportionately Latino."

The majority of the arrests are for no operator's license or driving while license revoked, she said.

"It begs the question, 'Why are they being stopped in the first place?'" Parker said. "We have not drawn any final conclusions, and we did not file the complaint, but we support this investigation."

But Jones and Alamance County Commissioner Linda Massey said when Parker came to the Sheriff's office in April 2009, she said the sheriff's office was not at fault.

"After explaining our traffic stop reporting system, she remarked our system could be an example for everyone in the state to follow" Jones wrote in an e-mail.

Massey recalls Parker telling the sheriff it was other agencies, including the Highway State Patrol, who "were arresting most of the Hispanics."

Parker said she was told to come alone to the sheriff's office on April 22 to "review samples and examples of the documents in order to narrow (the) document request."

In an e-mail from Albright to Parker, he wrote that she needed to come alone in order "to meet the requirements of protecting personal and private information."

In the meeting, Parker said, she did mention other agencies but "reiterated that (the ACLU) had received complaints from Alamance."

"They required me to come to that meeting alone and now I know why," Parker said. "It was so they could clearly misrepresent me. And it doesn't matter if the ACLU has concerns, which we do, but the Department of Justice clearly has concerns."

Sheriff's Supporters

But Johnson is not without his own supporters. He was first elected in 2002 and is currently running for reelection.

Johnson spoke at the third Alamance County TEA Party held June 19, and he was introduced by Rep. Howard Coble, R-NC, as "the best sheriff in the country," to which crowd erupted in applause.

"If the federal government doesn't want me to enforce the laws," Johnson said during his speech, "then get them off the books."

The county commissioners, except Commissioner Ann Vaughan, voted in support of Johnson and "the full implementation of 287(g)."

Sutton said the justice department's investigation is "pure harassment."

"They are so pro-Latino, so pro-immigrant," Sutton said. "They refuse to admit we have an illegal immigration crisis. We are not breaking the law. We have a good sheriff."

The people who support the investigation are narrow-minded, he said.

When an individual feels compassion for a particular group but can't "stand to hear a negative word against them," he said it was then time to get out of the debate.

Laura Roselle, an Elon University professor of political science, conducted her own study of traffic data in 2009 using state data. When Sheriff Johnson announced in February 2009 that the sheriff's office had made traffic stops on 494 Hispanic drivers from 2004 to 2008, Roselle investigated the claim.

She discovered there were actually 1,344 during the same time period, 850 more than Johnson originally reported.

The sheriff's office claimed the difference was the result of software complications.

"It is Roselle and cohorts," Sutton continued, "who think we have to turn a blind eye if the person is illegal."

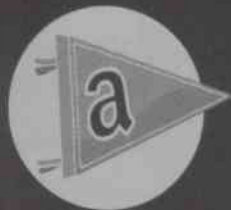
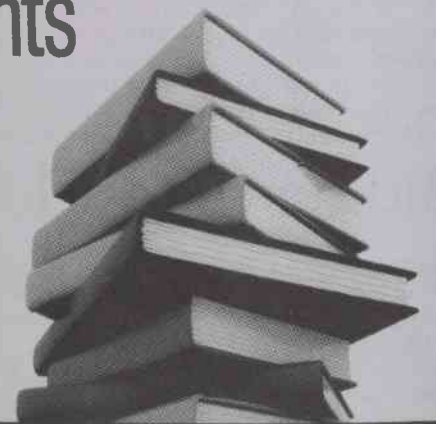
Miyar said there is no speculation as to when the investigation will conclude.

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