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FRIDAY, November 18, 2016



Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of Kathryn Johnston

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In the middle of the night, on November 21, 2006, men in uniform who had sworn to protect the public gunned down a 92-year-old woman in her home. These men were Atlanta police officers. Thirty-nine shots were fired, at least five ripped through her body. This woman, Ms. Kathryn Johnston, a mother, a grandmother, a neighbor, a friend lay shot in her home, bleeding, handcuffed, and dying. It has been ten years since the killing of Ms. Kathryn Johnston. On this 10th anniversary of Ms. Johnston's death, the ACRB pauses to reflect on her death, her legacy, and the challenges going forward.

Ten years later, excessive force and police misconduct continue virtually unabated.

Social media, daily news and troubled neighborhoods constantly report repeated killings, indictments and acquittals; seemingly innocent people being shot down; good cops being ambushed and assassinated.

The emergence of body-worn cameras has also brought in some areas laws enacted that make them virtually inaccessible to residents whose taxes paid for the cameras, rendering them useless for community transparency and understanding.

Protests and talks about the need for change rarely seem to result in tangible improvement..

So, the question is what has changed for the better in the ten years since Ms. Johnston's death.

It is difficult to claim significant success over officer misconduct and officer accountability. Yes, we have seen some improvement in training, the creation of a civilian oversight board, a few indictments of police officers, and the rare conviction. However, we have yet to have the community and law enforcement agree on a common set of expectations that can be applied to officer misconduct actions in a reliable and credible manner that inspires trust and confidence in law enforcement.

When only 25% of the ACRB sustained complaints received discipline from the APD in 2015, it is difficult to state definitively that civilian oversight is a big success. Despite greater community education and awareness efforts, the creation of a mediation program, the addition of anonymous complaints filings, the expanded areas of investigations, policy recommendations, increased transparency and citizen advisory opinions, the effectiveness of the agency hinges upon the actions of the APD on sustained

ACRB complaints. At the end of the day, citizens want to know that officers are being held accountable for their actions. As one community member said regarding the low level of discipline on sustained complaint, “it appears as if, the rejections of the ACRB sustained complaints are efforts to dissuade the public’s support for oversight.”

Despite the challenges, the most enduring legacy of Ms. Johnston’s death is the ACRB. Born out of her tragic loss and nurtured by the commitment of dedicated board members and staff and the continued financial investment of the city administrators, the agency continues to press for officer accountability, fairness, and transparency. The agency serves as the town crier on matters related to officer accountability and mutual responsibility in interactions between citizens and officers.

While some criticize the ACRB because it cannot force the APD to discipline officers, I believe that the ACRB’s true strength is its ability to communicate to public, without filters or obfuscation, the truth about incidents, policies, and officer accountability or lack thereof. ACRB’s thorough investigations and direct communication to citizens give some measure of power over policing back to the people who pay for it.

It is the communication that allows citizens to demand and expect their elected officials to hold law enforcement administrators accountable for the conduct of their officers. It is this same communication that informs the public of issues that should be considered when candidates are seeking support for elected office. It is the communication that ultimately holds elected officials, the agency, and the police departments accountable.

Ten years later, we as a city have yet to realize the full potential of the ACRB. Civilian oversight alone cannot solve the problem of police officer misconduct and holding one of the most powerful and wealthiest forms of government accountable. It was never designed to be the silver bullet. Civilian oversight is a tool that citizens, elected officials and law enforcement departments can use to solve the problem.

Ten years from now, we will still be faced with some of same the challenges as we do today. But if citizens become more engaged in and aware of the process; if they rise up in big numbers and use the resources of civilian oversight to speak truth to power; if they call for and create more than just one civilian review board in the entire State of Georgia, then this small island of accountability known as the Atlanta Citizen Review Board will have done its job and the death of Ms. Johnson will not have been in vain.

The Atlanta Citizen Review Board is an agency of the City of Atlanta

