The View of the Executive Director

We constantly stress the fact that CITIZEN is the most important word in our name. Our very existence as an agency depends upon concerned, active citizens speaking out when it comes to conditions in their communities; challenging city officials to fulfill the promises to citizens that got them elected; and getting involved with us.

Far too often residents turn a blind or cynical eye to repeated acts of destructive illegal activity in their communities, having concluded long ago that there is nothing that can be done to improve a situation or correct an officer behaving badly. Inaction virtually guarantees that police misconduct and other oppressive acts will continue unabated.

So ask yourself the following questions:

1-Do you know your elected representatives’ record on civilian oversight of law enforcement?
2-If you are aware of a regular pattern of misconduct by a sworn officer of the Atlanta Police Department (APS) and Atlanta Department of Corrections (ADC), have you reported it to ACRB?
3-Do you know that you can contact one of our seasoned investigators and file a complaint anonymously? NOBODY NEEDS TO KNOW.
4-If you felt disrespected by an officer, have you sought free mediation through the agency?

We send a heartfelt thank you to the growing number of citizens who make it a point to show up for our events and training programs. What so many of you did for us during January’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday March, for example, was outstanding! We look to see even more citizens coming through for us in 2017.

So remember, if you ever have a question about the agency and/or a complaint about an Atlanta police or corrections officers’ action, contact the ACRB at 404-865-8622. Email us at acrb@atlantaga.gov. Visit our website at www.acrb.gov.org.

The Atlanta Citizen Review Board is here to serve you!

APD Chief Shields at ACRB Says Officer Accountability Is Her Top Priority

Shortly after assuming one of the highest local law enforcement positions in the City of Atlanta, Erika Shields, the newly appointed 24th Chief of the Atlanta Police Department (APD) and the city’s second female APD chief, presented herself before the ACRB during its monthly meeting.

Chief Shields brought with her two key members of her staff. She introduced to the Board Major Celeste Murphy, her choice to run the APD’s Office of Professional Standards (OPS), and assured the Board that an OPS member would attend each monthly meeting of the ACRB. Next, Chief Shields introduced her Chief of Staff, Major Ben McGee who runs her office.

Board Chair Sherry Williams, in welcoming the new Chief, said “As we move forward, we do not want to be a thorn, but we want to help you move this city forward.” Shields responded “It’s okay that you’re a thorn. I’ve done this job long enough to know that as law enforcement after a while we stop seeing things because we get so conditioned to doing things a certain way, so I have no problem with feedback and observations.”

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Images from the Martin Luther King, Jr. March & Rally
The Atlanta Police Department, not unlike most modern big city police forces, is equipped with some of the most state-of-the-art devices that are designed to help the job of an officer in the performance of his/her duties, whether on the streets or in the office. But a poor outcome can almost be assured without proper supervision and training on how a device is to be used.

And so it was on Friday, August 19, 2016 that driver Jonathan Pierce was pulled over on the Downtown expressway and issued a ticket by a motorcycle police officer for driving illegally in the HOV lane. “I was frustrated from getting a ticket,” Pierce recalls. “I kinda threw it (the ticket and driver’s license) into my backpack it (the ticket and driver’s license) into my backpack and went on my way.”

The following week, when he retrieved the document to put the court date on his calendar, he realized that “all the information was wrong, then looked at the license, and it was the wrong license. He had given me another person’s ticket and another person’s license,” he said.

Pierce did some research and tried to rectify the situation on his own, but said no one really knew what to do about it. Unable to solve the problem on his own, he purchased a new driver’s license as authorities confiscated the old one. “I was also concerned that there was no ticket information on the website or in the court, there was nothing on the dockets for me, but for the person who did get a ticket, the wrong ticket, there was information.” He was concerned that he could miss a court date or be slapped with a penalty due to a lack of information on his ticket.

Dissatisfied with the outcome, Pierce decided to file a complaint online with ACRB, “not really knowing what the process was and thinking nothing really would come of it. At least I did what I could and my due diligence in formalizing some sort of complaint just in case, you know.”

Pierce was impressed by ACRB. “The process itself was very smooth. The person (investigator at ACRB) who handled my case was professional. I had nothing but a good experience with her.”

Pierce was notified by ACRB that on December 8, 2016, it completed its review of the complaint investigation. It determined that Pierce’s “allegation of Appropriate Action Required be assigned a finding of Sustained,” because “the investigation established that there was sufficient evidence that the alleged acts occurred.”

The Board recommended an apology for the inconvenience of having to replace his license due to Officer Bowen’s negligence.” Pierce was advised that if he chose to do so, the city would likely reimburse him the $5 cost to replace his license. He never filed a claim nor received an apology. But Pierce says for him, officer re-training on the device is more important.

ACRB Attends the Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday March & Rally

ACRB joined thousands of regular citizens, civic/union/youth groups, fraternal organizations, governmental agencies and special interests who peacefully gathered to honor the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The remarkable diversity of race, creed and color, marching together along Peachtree Street and Auburn Avenue toward the King Center, reflected the kind of society that Dr. King envisioned in his famous “I Have A Dream” address during the March on Washington more than 50 years ago.

“We are here to show solidarity with our brothers and sisters...and fellowship, strength and bond,” said Scott Primrose, one of a number of volunteers who marched with ACRB. “And not let our children forget why Dr. King did what he did,” another volunteer added.

Starting at the Peachtree MARTA Station across from the Ellis Hotel, members of ACRB’s Community Outreach Volunteer Ambassador Program (COVAP) handed out goody bags to the thousands of onlookers along the 1.6 mile march route. Many COVAP members brought their children and expressed how important it was for them to witness the event and be a part of it. “So that they can understand that they have rights and they need to fight for them,” volunteer Kimberly Tarver explained.

“Captain Integrity” made his first public appearance on behalf of the agency. Many children know ACRB’s superhero from a children’s activity and coloring book that is distributed by ACRB at branches of the Fulton-Atlanta Public Library during the branches’ Story Time event for young children.

The agency uses the event as part of its series of KNOW YOUR RIGHTS TRAINING WORKSHOPS that are offered at all 34 branches of the library system. Captain Integrity’s superpower is that he is a human lie detector who cannot tell a lie. The Captain’s message to kids is to always tell the truth to a trusted adult if they ever encounter police misconduct.

(See images from the MLK March on Page 2)
KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AND BE HEARD!

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The keyword in the Atlanta Citizen Review Board is CITIZEN. The agency is only as effective as the level of Citizen involvement. This is why ACRB urges all Citizens to regularly monitor, question and support its work. This is why ACRB urges all Citizens to know where your elected officials stand on civilian oversight of police and corrections. This is why it is so important for Citizens to be registered and vote. This is why Citizens need to join and be active in community groups. Get involved in Neighborhood Planning Units (NPUs). Attend Public Safety meetings, Atlanta City Council meetings and KNOW YOUR RIGHTS TRAINING WORKSHOPS. Become a member of the ACRB Board. Currently there are two vacancies. Be an ACRB Volunteer through our Community Outreach Volunteer Ambassador Program (COVAP). Fill the chambers to capacity when Council votes to fund issues that matter to Citizens like you. Thank you, Citizens of Atlanta, for your continued support.

COVAP Leader Shenita Johnson Chosen by Volunteers

In 2016, more than 100 citizens signed up to be trained volunteers under its Community Outreach Volunteer Ambassador Program (COVAP).

They attend and support events, meetings and programs. They play a vital role in monitoring community concerns, educating the public about the agency’s services and being a presence when needed to respond to social/political issues that involve police misconduct. It is considered to be one of the agency’s most important programs.

Among their ranks, fellow COVAP members elected longtime community organizer and outspoken activist Phyllis Shenita Johnson to lead them.

Johnson joined COVAP in 2016. She describes COVAP as “an organization that is worthwhile. We’re trying to build it up, and we need all the support that we can.” Johnson said, “We want to put teeth in that organization, and that’s what we’re intent on doing.” (Call 404 865 8622 for the next COVAP meeting.)

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And I’m appreciative of what you all are doing. “I know you (Board members) have better things you could be doing, or spending your time in other areas. And I appreciate that you are taking personal time and coming here and committing yourselves to this oversight committee.”

Shields, who joined the force in 1995, spent the better part of an hour listening intently to the Board, addressing their specific concerns and answering all questions in detail.

Chief Shields said her “number one priority in terms of officer’s conduct and discipline is that people are held accountable for their actions. And if we have an employee who is not holding up the standards that I expect that the City of Atlanta should be afforded, then we will deal with that employee. I hope that even if you’re not entirely satisfied with how maybe a decision we come with, there will at least be an element where we explain why we made the decision that we made. But I would hope that more often than not that we would agree,” said Chief Shields.

Board Chair Williams cited the very high number of sustained cases by the Board that are overturned by the APD. Chief Shields says she plans to review and reconcile the APD/ACRB statistics for accuracy.

“I think we need to do a better job at APD of reconciling the data consistent with the Board,” she said, “...I agree with you, the percentage jumped out of what we agreed with you on...I could not capture from the data we captured from our side where the disconnect was, and I need to get there.” Chief Shields called on the Board to provide her with data as she reviews prior cases to determine whether discrepancies in the data account for the high number of overturned cases.