

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Op-Ed



“Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of the Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB)”

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Thirty-nine shots were fired, at least five ripped through her body. Ms. Kathryn Johnston, a mother, a grandmother, a neighbor, a friend, lay dying, shot in her home, bleeding and handcuffed. It was the middle of the night, November 21, 2006. Mother Johnston, as she was affectionally known, became an innocent victim of police corruption. Men in uniform who had sworn to protect the City of Atlanta shot and killed a 92-year-old woman in her home. These men were Atlanta police officers.

Ten months later, after vigorous protest from an outraged community and groups of clergies, elected and appointed officials, businessmen and business women, the tragic incident resulted in the creation of the Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB). Council members C.T. Martin, H. Lamar Willis, and Ivory Lee Young, Jr. led the charge on the Atlanta City Council to create the agency by introducing legislation aimed to give Atlanta citizens independent civilian oversight of the city’s law enforcement officers. The ordinance was unanimously approved by the Atlanta City Council and the Mayor in 2007 and the ACRB opened its doors September of 2008, tasked with investigating citizens’ complaints of misconduct against sworn officers of the Atlanta Police Department (APD) and the Atlanta Department of Corrections (ADC).

As we commemorate ten years...a decade of dedicated service to citizens of and visitors to Atlanta, we thank the hundreds of those who have trusted the agency enough and reported incidents with local police that caused them to file formal complaints or seek informal mediation through ACRB. As we go about our daily work to fulfill the goal of bringing police and citizens together, we also thank the thousands of people who have discovered who we are and what we do through our many community outreach presentations, our KNOW YOUR RIGHTS TRAINING WORKSHOPS, and special events like our ART & ESSAY CONTEST that promote education, understanding, peaceful dialogue and mutual respect for everyone.

Thanks in part to our ever-expanding outreach to community groups, transparency and cooperation with the ACRB by the APD, there are significant signs of improved relations. Five years ago, for example, it would have been difficult, if not impossible for an APD officer to be authorized to pose for billboards throughout the city promoting ACRB’s Mediation Program. Now, when needed, the ACRB and APD collaborate to provide training and advisement on programs and matters that benefit the community, police and civilian oversight. APD should be commended for weeding out a significant amount of

corruption within its ranks over the last ten-year period. Much of the recent progress can be attributed to continued support from Council Member Ivory Lee Young, Jr., who introduced legislation in 2016 to expand the ACRB ordinance, APD Chief Erika Shields, Atlanta City Council and Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms' administration.

It would be of great benefit in the coming years for the community and law enforcement to formally come together and agree on a common set of core values and expectations that can be applied to officer misconduct actions in a reliable and comprehensive manner that inspires mutual trust and confidence. Improved officer training should also help reduce fatal encounters with police.

It would be true to state that civilian oversight has not reached the zenith of its success yet. Our most recent numbers related to the Chief of Police handling of ACRB sustained allegations showed the percentage of acceptance at 47%. While this certainly represents an increase over past reports, the level of discipline on sustained complaints by the APD remains unacceptably low, an issue that the ACRB needs to address with Chief Shields. Despite greater community education and awareness efforts, the creation of the mediation program, the addition of anonymous complaints filings, the expanded areas of investigations, policy recommendations and increased transparency, more needs to be done to address citizen complaints.

Yet the ACRB remains the only civilian oversight agency in the State of Georgia and most of the Southeastern United States that large and small jurisdictions around the country regularly contact and seek to replicate. Despite the challenges, the ACRB remains the most enduring legacy of Ms. Johnston's tragic death. The darkness surrounding her loss of life continues to be a beacon of light and hope for those who demand to be heard. Nurtured by the commitment of dedicated board members and staff and the continued financial investment of the city leaders, the agency will never stop pressing for officer accountability, fairness, transparency, peaceful dialogue and cooperation with citizens.

What was expressed at the ten-year anniversary of the death of Ms. Johnston remains true today: civilian oversight alone cannot solve the problem of police officer misconduct...It was never designed to be a 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 surrounding municipalities, then this small island of accountability known as the Atlanta Citizen Review Board will have done its job and the death of Ms. Johnston will not have been in vain.



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