

Shootings Bring Response

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

too many unanswered questions regarding the facts and circumstances surrounding each of the shootings and we eagerly await completion and publication of the investigative reports," said the leaders.

Some of the requests made to Clark County Prosecutor Tony Golik includes reports on officer training, where officers work and past complaints against officers. The county's three police agencies: Clark County Sheriff, Battle Ground Police, and Vancouver Police, were also sent letters for detailed information.

There have been five officer involved shootings that have occurred within a four month span since late November. The three most recent—which occurred within just a three week span—were fatal.

That includes the death of Carlos Hunter, 43, a person of color who was fatally shot by two Vancouver Police detectives during a traffic stop on March 7. Hunter was said to have reached for a gun just before the shooting during what was reported to be a drug dealing investigation, according to an investigation by the Regional Major Crimes Team; the shooting by Vancouver police of Michael Pierce, 29, a white man who was homeless and known to suffer from schizophrenia, after he was reportedly pointing gun replicas to passersby and to his own head on Feb. 28; and the shooting by Vancouver police Cpl. Roger Evans of Clayton Joseph, 16, a male of Pacific Island descent who was said to be brandishing a knife and refusing to drop it before he was shot on Feb. 19.

"Notwithstanding the question of whether a shooting can be legally justified, our concern is also whether a culture exists within the police departments within Clark County that influences premature,

inappropriate and overly aggressiveness actions through use of deadly force in situations involving minorities and underprivileged citizens," the activists said.

Marzette and Hinojosa also want answers to questions about whether there is sufficient anti-bias and de-escalation training of police officers. Specific questions about the three aforementioned shootings include asking how far away the officers were when they took shots, and whether they tried any non-deadly force options—like rubber bullets, tasers, etc.—before resorting to the use of a gun.

Both Hinojosa and Marzette, who is also a member of the Vancouver Police Chief's Diversity Advisory Team, stressed that they hold no animosity toward local police, but just want more information for clarity and transparency.

"We're not suggesting that Clark County has any mal-intended officers out there acting with evil intent," said Hinojosa, who once opened his home to one of the victims, Pierce, and his then-pregnant girlfriend during a winter when they were homeless a few years ago.

Hinojosa and Marzette agreed that there are improved community relationships that are ongoing, compared to just a few years ago—both from Clark County Sheriff and Vancouver Police Department—such as being able to ask face-to-face questions to law enforcement about their concerns.

A signal that Vancouver Police Department is taking a step in the right direction in regard to community relations is Police Chief James McElvain's stated willingness late last month to seriously consider mandatory body cameras for officers, something that had previously not been considered, Marzette said.

And Hinojosa notes that a joint statement put out back in August

by Golik and Clark County Sheriff Chuck Atkins condemning white supremacy and hate crimes was "definitely well received," though they'll be working toward making sure that declaration is properly implemented.

"I think the bottom line ... when we read or hear about something in our community [related to hate crimes], we wanted the assurance that we, along with the law enforcement community, were taking the position that we were not going to allow that to spread and increase in our area," Marzette said.

Marzette and Hinojosa have also expressed optimism over the recent passage of a statewide law in Washington, Initiative 940, last fall, which makes it easier to bring criminal charges against officers believed to have wrongfully used deadly force, when before a barrier in state law made that almost impossible.

No longer do prosecutors have to prove "evil intent" of officers in situations where they've killed someone when considering whether to file criminal charges, such as manslaughter. Instead, the burden of proof is whether a reasonable officer would have acted the same way under the same circumstances. In addition, the law requires any incident involving deadly force to be independently investigated; requires de-escalation and mental health training

for officers; and requires police to give first aid to a victim of deadly force.

"These are all good things as we progress forward," Hinojosa said.

As to whether a recent basketball tournament-turned-school disturbance on March 15 at Gaiser Middle School in Vancouver, in which 27 students were suspended and nine were arrested, was reflective of community-police tensions, Marzette said they don't have enough information on the matter to make that claim. It was reported that racial slurs were used in the incident that started as

an apparent altercation between students and ended with 33 police officers being called to the scene, according to Clark County Sheriff's Office. Hinojosa added the incident was "very concerning."

Hinojosa said that if the community can come together with police officers to have serious and difficult conversations, it could result in positive change in how the various law enforcement departments interact with the public.

"We're definitely concerned and we're upset and all that. But we're having conversations now. And let's move those forward. I think we'll be in better shape in a year."

NAACP Vancouver and LULAC Southwest Washington's joint letter can be viewed in its entirety at portlandobserver.com.

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