

Monday, March 18, 2024

Attorney General Merrick Garland

U.S. Department of Justice

950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20530-0001

CC: Jason R. Coody

U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Florida

111 North Adams Street, 4th Floor

U.S. Courthouse

Tallahassee, FL 32301

Subject: Urgent Request for DOJ Patterns and Practice Investigation into the Okaloosa Florida Sheriff's Office

Dear Attorney General Garland and U.S. Attorney Coody,

I am Diop Kamau, the Director of The Equal Justice Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating for civil rights and addressing police misconduct. This letter constitutes a formal complaint and an urgent request for a Department of Justice (DOJ) Patterns and Practice Investigation into the Okaloosa Florida Sheriff's Office led by Sheriff Eric Aden. This request stems from a series of profoundly concerning incidents that reflect a pattern of civil rights violations, excessive force, racial profiling, and a systemic lack of accountability within the sheriff's office.

Based on the records obtained in our investigation, the concerns regarding the Okaloosa Florida Sheriff's Office under Sheriff Eric Aden's leadership encompass a series of deeply troubling incidents that underscore a systemic problem within the department involving the treatment of men of color. These incidents, involving Marquis Jackson, Kendrick Wright, Felix Lopez, and Lorenzo Scott, clearly illustrate patterns of misconduct that necessitate immediate and comprehensive review.

Expanded Examination of Key Incidents:

- **Marquis Jackson:** A misuse of deadly force in a shooting incident on November 12, 2023, involving Okaloosa sheriff deputies firing into a car where Marquis Jackson,

an unarmed and handcuffed individual, was seated, starkly demonstrates the excessive use of force. Okaloosa deputies contacted Mr. Jackson following a verbal altercation with his girlfriend. He was searched three times before being placed in the back seat of an Okaloosa sheriff's patrol car. After he was handcuffed, deputies began firing into the patrol vehicle, recklessly endangering Mr. Jackson and innocent bystanders without any legal justification. This act, captured on body-worn cameras, starkly illustrates a disregard for life and safety, highlighting a grave misuse of authority.

- **Kendrick Wright:** The unjust tasing of Kendrick Wright during a routine traffic stop on June 7, 2022, where he posed no immediate threat, is indicative of the excessive force and poor judgment by deputies. Despite Wright's non-aggressive behavior, this incident resulted in the wrongful application of less-lethal force, emphasizing the need for better training and oversight. All charges were dropped against Mr. Wright after the police and state attorneys' office wrongfully convicted him of resisting arrest.
- **Felix Lopez and Lorenzo Scott:** The continuous harassment and racial profiling faced by Felix Lopez and his son Lorenzo, through repeated, unwarranted traffic stops and derogatory comments, reflect a concerning pattern of targeting based on ethnicity. The Okaloosa Sheriff's Office issued a be on the lookout for Felix Lopez, though he had committed no crime. The deputies appeared to be interested in why Mr. Lopez refurbished police cars. He and his son reported being harassed and stopped approximately 30 times. The mocking behavior of deputies, as noted, towards their use of refurbished police vehicles as a hobby, underscores a bias and unprofessional conduct within the sheriff's office. The Sheriff's Department denied wrongdoing, though their cameras recorded the misconduct. The Sheriff's Department has continued to harass and follow Felix and his son in apparent retaliation for their reports of misconduct against deputies.

Witnesses interviewed for this report:

Marquis Jackson- excessive force victim

Kendrick Wright-excessive force victim

Felix Lopez-racial profiling harassment victim

Lorenzo Scott-racial profiling harassment victim

Marquis Jackson's mother- witness (name withheld)

Yedlin Lopez- witness

Sheriff Eric Aden's Recent Acknowledgment of the Marquis Jackson Incident: A Reflection of Deeper Issues

Sheriff Eric Aden's response to the Marquis Jackson shooting, while acknowledging the tragedy, fails to address the systemic misconduct within the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office. This singular acknowledgment highlights a gap between the office's proclaimed values and actual practices, undermining trust in its commitment to reform.

Key Points of Concern:

1. **Systemic Discrimination and Excessive Force:** Evidence from a six-year investigation by the Equal Justice Project and multiple DOJ complaints reveals a pattern of racial profiling and unjust force, particularly against African American individuals. Sheriff Aden's portrayal of the Jackson incident as isolated is misleading and ignores a documented history of similar cases.
2. **Obfuscation and Record Manipulation:** The office's reluctance to fulfill public record requests and its alteration of documents contradict claims of transparency, indicating a deliberate effort to shield misconduct. We have collected evidence proving that Sheriff Aden charges excessive fees (over \$1300.00) for video evidence of wrongdoing by his deputies to prevent the public from viewing the misconduct. We also found proof that Sheriff Aiden deliberately blurs out evidence of misconduct from publicly released videos.
3. **Repeated Misuse of Force:** The cases of Marquis Jackson and Kendrick Wright underscore a recurring issue of excessive force, with the latter's charges being dismissed without acknowledgment by Sheriff Aden, raising questions about the thoroughness and impartiality of internal investigations.
4. **Dismissal of Complaints and Absence of Discipline:** The office's disregard for valid complaints, such as Felix Lopez's repeated unjust stops, indicates a systemic neglect of accountability and a refusal to address internal problems.
5. **Misrepresentation of Reform Efforts:** Sheriff Aden's public appeals for trust, particularly to the NAACP and community members, contrast sharply with the lack of significant action towards reform, suggesting a superficial approach to resolving critical issues.

Rather than demonstrating a genuine commitment to change, Sheriff Aden's recent statements reveal an ongoing reluctance to confront and rectify deep-seated issues within his office, necessitating a more earnest and action-oriented approach to rebuilding community trust.

In conclusion, the persistent and troubling evidence of misconduct within the Okaloosa Florida Sheriff's Office, particularly towards African American and Latino individuals, mandates immediate and comprehensive intervention by the Department of Justice. The incidents involving Marquis Jackson, Kendrick Wright, Felix Lopez, and Lorenzo Scott, among others, not only demonstrate a clear pattern of excessive force, racial profiling, and a disregard for the due process rights of individuals but also highlight a systemic failure to uphold fundamental human rights and legal protections. As such, The Equal Justice Project urges the DOJ to initiate a Patterns and Practice Investigation into the Okaloosa Florida Sheriff's Office to ensure accountability, restore public trust, and implement necessary reforms that respect and protect the civil liberties of all citizens. We stand ready to provide further documentation and assist in any investigation. Your immediate attention to this urgent matter is critical for the victims of these injustices and the integrity of law enforcement practices across our nation.

Sincerely,

Diop Kamau

Director, The Equal Justice Project

diopkamau@policeabuse.com

(850) 566-7960

3425 Bannerman Road #164

Tallahassee, Florida 32312

Enclosures:

- Detailed accounts of incidents involving Marquis Jackson, Kendrick Wright, Felix Lopez, and Lorenzo Lopez
- Previous communications with local authorities regarding these concerns
- Summary of The Equal Justice Project's findings and recommendations for reform