

# CITIZEN-LED POLICE OVERSIGHT IN SYRACUSE: CUAPB AND THE ORIGINS OF THE CITIZEN REVIEW BOARD

by Members of SPAARC (Syracuse Police Accountability And Reform Coalition)

*In 2018, a new group called Syracuse Police Accountability And Reform Coalition (SPAARC) was formed to bring forward the work begun by CUAPB (Citizens United Against Police Brutality), the New York Civil Liberties Union, and others. SPAARC's organizational focus is driven by community concerns related to police misconduct and a lack of trust between the Syracuse Police Department and the many communities they serve. This focus drives three key efforts related to the use of excessive force:*

*1) Strengthening the Citizen Review Board's authority to investigate police misconduct.*

*2) Improving oversight and legal accountability for School Resource Officers.*

*3) Providing critical evaluation of developing police policy including the use of force, police union contract provisions, and the use of body-worn cameras (BWCs).*

*SPAARC is focused on elevating citizen demands for police transparency and accountability in ways that build stronger community relationships for all local residents.*

*The rest of this article relates some history of the citizen oversight movement in Syracuse. For updates and current actions, watch for future articles.*

Citizen demands for police accountability and transparency have existed in Syracuse, New York for many years. Most often, residents were concerned with the daily police actions they believed would lead to a fatal encounter, including the use of force and racially discriminatory police practices while conducting stops, searches, and seizures.

## 1970. Police Shoots in the Back and Kills Jeremiah Mitchell, 18.

On the night of August 18, 1970, these fears crystallized into an enduring public conversation about police accountability when Jeremiah Mitchell, an 18-year-old Black male Syracuse resident, was shot in the back and killed by Syracuse Police Officer Paul Larkin. A group of youth were involved in an attempted mugging, and Larkin and his partner reported that they were actively looking for suspects. After a grand jury found Officer Larkin's actions "absolutely and unequivocally justifiable," the Chairman of the Human Rights Commission of Syracuse and Onondaga County Raymond Gantter responded that in light of the 84 pages of testimony and statements, these findings equaled a "travesty of justice" (*Post-Standard* 1970).

*SPAARC is a grassroots collective committed to transformational, citizen-led police reform. Contact SPAARC at [spaarc315@gmail.com](mailto:spaarc315@gmail.com).*

Mitchell's mother brought a civil action arguing that her son's death "was caused by acts of negligence and excessive use of force on the part of Officer Paul Larkin, and by negligence on the part of the City of Syracuse and its police force in hiring and training Larkin" (*Herring v. City of Syracuse* 1975). On April 21, 1976 a six-person jury cleared Larkin of any civil responsibility and wrongdoing in young Jeremiah Mitchell's death.

## 1979. Dennis Collins, 19, Beaten, Hospitalized for Six Days; Camera Destroyed.

On March 25, 1979, public conversation regarding police negligence and unwarranted use of force was revived. This occurred after the beating of a Black male Syracuse resident and photographer for a local paper, 19-year-old Dennis Collins. After retrieving his camera to document police behavior, Collins was beaten, and his camera destroyed. At this point, Collins ran from the police and was chased. Collins stopped running and put up his hands to demonstrate that he was surrendering. The police apprehended him and then continued to beat Collins so severely that he was hospitalized for six days.

Residents gathered together almost immediately to formalize their collective experiences into a grassroots organization.



Dennis Collins in the hospital after the beating. This was the cover of the CUAPB brochure. Photo: Alan Rosenthal archives.

The first formal meeting was held on May 16, 1979. By the second meeting two weeks later, the collective came to be known as Citizens United Against Police Brutality (CUAPB). At this meeting, organizers discussed Collins' decision to take pictures as an appropriate engagement of his First Amendment

right to document police behavior. They also noted that Collins' beating took place outside, in the middle of a street, and in front of several witnesses. Organizers concluded that, "the police are getting bolder and bolder, and think they can get away with it anywhere at any time" (CUAPB May 16 Meeting Minutes 1979).

Collins refused a plea bargain on the police charges against him for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. Collins was expected to stand trial for these charges. As he prepared to do so, Collins and CUAPB framed this day in court as a mobilizing moment for the greater community. Collins requested that the community join and stand with him on the platform of a much larger community trial—that of the police, brought to stand and be held accountable for perceived injustices in the community.

CUAPB had two express demands in the fall of 1979: to have all charges against Collins dropped and to obtain "community control of police." A march took place on September 8, 1979, a warm Saturday afternoon, to raise awareness on behalf of these issues. Personal photographs from community members show a large crowd making their way from King School to the County Courthouse carrying homemade signs and banners. This set of photographs show a predominantly Black crowd with notable race and age diversity. There is also a visual prioritization of the Spanish language in organizing materials.

## 1980. Raul Mora, Beaten By Police, Dies.

CUAPB organizing continued to spark critical conversations, both about the role of police as an institution and the behaviors and tactics of police as social actors. This collective voice gained significant momentum with each new case of police violence in their community. On September 8, 1980, four Syracuse Police Department officers beat an unarmed man in the parking lot of a downtown hospital. Witnesses at the scene reported that officers brutally beat Raul Mora, a local Mexican-American man, and arrested him for allegedly breaking into vehicles. Mora later died after being taken off life-support. CUAPB rallied with several community organizations to pressure the District Attorney to fully investigate the



CUAPB demonstration at the Onondaga County Courthouse. Photo: Alan Rosenthal archives.

Syracuse Police Department, and "for the first time in the history of Syracuse, police officers were indicted by an Onondaga County Grand Jury for their brutality"—an accomplishment that CUAPB stressed "was a step forward for community control of the police."

## CUAPB Leads Push For Citizen Oversight of Police.

Mora's death spurred the collective to fully invest themselves in legal research and the creation of public policy. It was clear to members that community grievances could not depend on the assistance of the District Attorney, the police department, grand juries, and even local trial juries. The CUAPB Steering Committee facilitated the creation of several research projects including the first draft of a citizen-led police oversight agency in Syracuse.

As early as October 1980, CUAPB wrote to elected officials requesting that they take a stand on issues of police violence, arguing that the continued policy of "police policing themselves... [has] proved ineffectual...[and] may have grave consequences on municipal liability." Local residents began to clearly link their concerns about racial discrimination against Black and Brown community members to the economic well-being of the city itself.

CUAPB founders had stated this link a year prior in their founding statement, suggesting that "police brutality, like its counterparts; racism and discrimination, is as much a part of the American scene of this urban community as poverty, ghettos, and inflation—all of which pose a serious threat to the economic and political vitality of all people" (CUAPB Statement 1981). In the year that followed Dennis Collins' beating, CUAPB focused on the political significance of their work and now they fully embraced the economic dimensions of their plight as well.

Over the next four months, CUAPB organizing built several integral partnerships with local clergy and organizations invested in civic engagement such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), National Lawyers Guild – Syracuse Chapter, State Conference for Lesbians and Gays, Syracuse University College of Law, the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), Spanish Action League, and the Urban League. Given what the collective understood to be a troubling pattern of injustice for minorities that experience police violence in Syracuse, CUAPB decided "that the only recourse is to come together as a committee, and in mass to defend the basic human rights of all minorities" irrespective of race, color, class, age, national origin, religion, sex, and sexual orientation (CUAPB Founding Document, 1979).

## 1991-93. City Creates The Citizen Review Board.

In the Fall of 1991, a Task Force on Police Community Relations was formed, with City Councilor Charles Anderson as Chair. Representatives from many of the above organizations were included. The Task Force recommended that the City create a Citizen Review Board to provide citizen oversight of the Syracuse Police Department. The CRB was established by the Common Council's approval of Local Law 11 in 1993. The law was modified in 2011 and is the basis for today's Citizen Review Board. The CRB accepts complaints about misconduct of SPD officers, investigates, conducts hearings, and conveys its findings to the Chief of Police. It also makes recommendations for changes in SPD policy and procedures based on the cases it reviews. ☯