



128 Dorrance Street, Suite 400
Providence, RI 02903
Phone: (401) 831-7171
Fax: (401) 831-7175
www.riaclu.org
info@riaclu.org

December 5, 2023

Honorable Brett Smiley
Providence City Hall
25 Dorrance Street
Providence, RI 02903
mayor@providenceri.gov

VIA EMAIL

Col. Oscar Perez
Providence Police Department
325 Washington Street
Providence, RI 02903
operez@providenceri.gov

Dear Mayor Smiley and Chief Perez:

Our office was contacted about an incident that occurred yesterday morning, and which is summarized in the news article [linked here](#), regarding the interaction that took place between two non-uniformed Providence Police officers and unhoused individuals living in a tent encampment in the city. I would appreciate receiving information from you about this incident, since the conduct of the officers is of great concern.

According to the individuals, these two unnamed officers ordered them and others at the camp site to provide identification, demanded entry into their tents, and searched the personal belongings of some of them. A camper present at the search claims that, when asked if he had a warrant, one of the officers allegedly responded, "We don't need a warrant. You live in a tent."

If this recitation of events is true, it raises very troubling civil liberties concerns, as that comment and the actions of the officers are in direct conflict with Rhode Island's Homeless Bill of Rights, which explicitly provides unhoused individuals a "right to a reasonable expectation of privacy in his or her personal property to the same extent as personal property in a permanent residence." R.I. Gen. Laws § 34-37.1-3(7). We believe it is essential that you repudiate the officer's comments and the actions these two individuals took, and engage in steps to ensure that all Providence police officers are well-versed in the requirements of the Homeless Bill of Rights.

We understand that the Mayor's chief of staff has stated that the two people who engaged in this conduct were not Providence police officers or otherwise associated with the

City. We do not know what level of inquiry was conducted to reach that conclusion, but we are constrained at this point to doubt its accuracy. Multiple individuals at the encampment, including a social worker who happened to see the two individuals leave the site, express certainty that they were Providence police officers in the narcotics division whom they have seen and interacted with before. While the two officers may not have engaged in this conduct with the knowledge of their supervisors, the allegations about their presence and actions deserve much closer investigation and scrutiny by the Department.

Indeed, an investigation of this incident by the police department is clearly warranted even if you are convinced that these two individuals were *not* Providence officers. The thought that two people carrying firearms impersonated being members of your force in order to roust and potentially prey on defenseless unhoused individuals should be of the utmost concern to you as well.

In light of the seriousness of the allegations and the urgency it suggests for protecting the privacy rights of other unhoused individuals, I would appreciate learning at the earliest opportunity what actions you plan to take to determine the identity of these two individuals and to address the serious issues raised by this incident.

Thank you in advance your prompt response to this request, and I look forward to hearing back from you about it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Brown". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steven" and last name "Brown" clearly distinguishable.

Steven Brown
Executive Director

cc: City Council President Rachel Miller
Eric Hirsch, RI Housing Advocacy Project