

Justice Department imposes wrist-slap “reforms” on Albuquerque police after series of shootings

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The US Department of Justice (DOJ) and the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, have reached a settlement agreement to implement a series of cosmetic “reforms” to the Albuquerque Police Department (APD) in the wake of a string of police murders.

The agreement involves the creation of an “independent monitoring team” selected jointly by the APD and the DOJ to implement a series of changes to training and policies.

In announcing the settlement, the DOJ notes that APD “officers routinely use deadly force and less lethal force in an unreasonable manner.” Yet the settlement does not hold any of the officers who participated in the string of police murders either administratively or criminally accountable, giving them effective legal impunity to kill again.

Over the past five years, Albuquerque cops have been involved in nearly 50 shootings, with at least 32 resulting in death. The coldblooded murder of mentally ill homeless man James Boyd last March ignited protests that led the DOJ, which had been carrying out an investigation of the APD’s history of violence, to step forward with the settlement.

The agreement comes as the city has undertaken a series of 10 community meetings—held in scattered locations around the city and ranging over a four-month period—during which community input will be channeled into small focus groups and limited by parameters set by city-contracted “facilitators.”

The facilitators will work to divert talk of firings, arrests and prosecution of killer cops, and instead emphasize “[e]mpathy, respect and greater understanding” between citizens and the APD, as the *Albuquerque Journal* reported on one such event.

The deal will be under federal court purview and claims to include updated officer training and more specific guidelines for the use of force.

The deal involves the nominal “dismantling” of the Repeat Offenders Project (ROP), members of which gunned down James Boyd in cold blood. The DOJ’s press release makes clear, however, that the goal of this action is to “restore its core mission as an investigative, rather than tactical, unit.” In other words, the unit, which used a hangman’s noose as its symbol on internal documents, will be allowed to continue in existence, albeit in somewhat modified form. *KRQE News 13* reported that “officers who are assigned to the unit will be allowed to remain in the Special Investigations Division. That group has an office set away from APD’s rank and file—and from its command staff.”

At a news conference, a reporter asked Mayor Richard Berry, “The majority of the new command structure at APD are individuals that come from the old guard and some of the specialized squads that have either been dismantled today or significantly reined in by the agreement. Those are folks who are now entrusted with implementing changes to a culture that they’ve helped create. How do you explain that?”

Berry praised APD chief Gorden Eden, well known for justifying the most egregious crimes by officers, and newly appointed deputy chief Bob Huntsman, a friend of Eden’s who was head of SWAT from 2000 to 2010. Berry concluded, “So I do have the confidence.”

Both Keith Sandy and Sean Wallace, who has shot three unarmed men in his career, were hired during Huntsman’s tenure with SWAT. Shannon Kennedy, an attorney who has been involved in officer misconduct

cases, said, “To me it just looks like more of the same.”

Berry estimated that the reforms will cost the city between \$4 and \$6 million for the first year, much of it designated for officer retraining and overtime coverage for officers who remain on the street while their colleagues are in training. Not a cent will be spent on prosecutions.

Signaling its real intentions, the APD announced this past summer that it would purchase 350 military-style AR-15 rifles—the very type of weapon used to kill James Boyd—and two armored vehicles costing over \$600,000. The APD Police Officers Association president defended the purchases and has publicly called on police trainees to receive assault weapons training.

The DOJ has over the past several years opened numerous investigations into municipal police departments, in New Orleans and Seattle, and among several other smaller departments.

The arming of municipal police with military weapons, tanks and ordnance, much of it funneled through the Department of Homeland Security, has become increasingly widespread throughout US police departments. Weapons of this type have also been deployed by Ferguson, Missouri, police in the wake of recent protests over the murder of Michael Brown.

New Mexico has the largest percentage of people living in poverty in the United States at 22 percent, higher than the country’s overall poverty rate of 15 percent. Child homelessness is widespread.



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