

Virginia police officials accused of human sex trafficking, intimidation

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A federal lawsuit in Northern Virginia alleges Fairfax County police officers protected a sex trafficking ring in exchange for freely sexually assaulting the victims. The lawsuit was filed late in 2021 by civil rights attorney Victor Glasberg and also names former Fairfax County Police Chief Ed Roessler as a defendant.

In December, Glasberg revealed the names of two officers: Michael O. Barbazette and Jason J. Mardocco, after the attorney obtained a court order requiring the police to identify the officers allegedly involved. Barbazette and Mardocco are no longer on the force.

The lawsuit, filed on behalf of an anonymous 43-year-old Costa Rican woman who was one of the alleged victims of the sex trafficking, states that the officers would alert the trafficking ring in advance of police sting operations.

According to the lawsuit, the Costa Rican “Jane Doe” was recruited to work as an escort in the United States. However, when she arrived in late 2010, the leader of the trafficking ring, Hazel Sanchez Cerdas, stole her passport and forced her to “have sex with up to 17 customers a day,” according to NBC Washington. This included “particularly humiliating or dangerous sex acts.” Sanchez served five years in prison for her part in the crimes.

“I begged the county to resolve this without litigation. I said, ‘Let’s get some accountability here,’” Glasberg disclosed to NBC. “In the end, they told me to go pound sand.”

Roessler, the police chief, allegedly covered up for the officers when another detective threatened to expose their misconduct. William Woolf, an anti-sex trafficking detective, alleged he was “threatened by high-ranking officers” in the Fairfax police. According to the lawsuit, Woolf received menacing phone calls from Roessler suggesting he “play ball,” or cooperate

with the police.

Fairfax County is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States with a median household income of about \$124,000. The county, located in Virginia’s suburbs near Washington D.C., is also the state’s most populous, with a total of 1,150,000 residents according to the 2020 census. The Fairfax County police force is the largest in the state, with 1,400 officers.

When Woolf complained to his supervisor Captain James Baumstark about the department’s thuggery, Baumstark allegedly declined to help him and instead ordered him to forget what he had learned about the trafficking. Woolf was the only officer working on the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force, an underfunded part of the county’s law enforcement bureau.

This is not the first time the Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD) has been accused of abuses of power. A study published last June by the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Cincinnati revealed that Fairfax police use higher levels of force against civilians than police violence researchers had previously believed.

Based on a three-year study of 1,360 incidents in which force was used, the study determined “force was used County-wide more often than expected against White and Black civilians” when resistance, race and other factors were taken into consideration.

The Fairfax County Police Department is only one of many police departments in the region that have engaged in malicious behavior, which is primarily directed against the working class.

Earlier this month, Democratic Attorney General of Virginia Mark R. Herring disclosed that Virginia Beach police had “repeatedly used forged documents purporting to be from the state Department of Forensic

Science during interrogations, falsely allowing suspects to believe DNA or other forensic evidence had tied them to a crime.”

According to the *Washington Post*, Herring, who has since been replaced by Republican Attorney General Jason S. Miyares, declared “[t]his was an extremely troubling and potentially unconstitutional tactic that abused the name of the Commonwealth to try to coerce confessions.”

The Virginia Beach Police Department declared the method was legal but that it was “not in the spirit of what the community expects.”

In October 2021, US District Judge Claude Hilton dismissed all criminal charges against the two officers involved in the 2017 killing of motorist Bijan Ghaisar. The 25-year-old was killed in a fusillade of bullets after leading two US Park Police on a short chase in a residential area. The Fairfax County Commonwealth’s Attorney and Virginia Attorney General’s Office are appealing the ruling.

Miyares, Virginia’s new Republican Attorney General and the son of Cuban anticommunist expatriates, has “very different visions for the office.” According to the *Post*, Miyares began his tenure as the state’s top law enforcement official by “firing about 30 of the roughly 450 members of [his] staff. They included attorneys who worked on civil rights, opioids, human trafficking and election issues.”



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