

Video footage and transcript expose police indifference in drowning of Arizona man

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Three police officers in Tempe, a city in eastern metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona, have been placed on nondisciplinary paid leave following the May 28 drowning death of a man as they watched from a bridge and refused to rescue him.

The tragedy began at about 5:00 a.m. on May 28, when the officers received a domestic dispute call at the Tempe Center for the Arts, which is next to a reservoir called Tempe Town Lake. Video footage shows two officers first talking to a woman who told them she was the wife of Sean Bickings, 34.

Although she was fidgety and nervous in the presence of the officers, she told them that there had been no physical violence, but that the two had argued and gotten loud. She insisted, “He didn’t do anything wrong.” At times, the sound is cut off without explanation. The faces of all five people in the video are digitally obscured.

They then went to join the other officer, who was questioning Bickings, whom the Tempe city website described as “an unsheltered Tempe community member.” While the officers were running the pair’s names through a database to check for outstanding arrest warrants, Bickings climbed over a four-foot metal fence. The officer told him he could not do that or swim in the lake but did not try to stop him.

Bickings walked down the embankment to the river and started swimming. One officer called for a boat, then they walked out onto the bridge. “How far do you think he’s going to be able to swim?” asked one of the officers.

By the time they had walked out onto the bridge, Bickings had swum about 30 or 40 yards out into the lake. A shout is heard, then the video abruptly ends and shows a message: “Due to the sensitive nature of the remaining portion of the recording, a transcript of the

sensitive portion of the event is being provided for full transparency.”

The transcript records the last moment of the increasingly desperate Bickings (“Victim”), begging for help, the anguish of his distraught wife (“Witness”), as well as the indifference of the officers:

Victim: (inaudible) [sic]

Officer 2: So what’s your plan right now?

Victim: I’m going to drown. I’m going to drown.

Officer 2: No, you’re not

Victim: (inaudible)

Officer 1: Go at least go to the pylon and hold on.

Victim: I’m drowning. (inaudible)

Officer 2: Come back over to the pylon.

Victim: I can’t. I can’t. (inaudible)

Officer 1: Okay, I’m not jumping in after you.

Victim: (inaudible) Please help me. Please, please please.

Officer 2: I don’t think they can get (inaudible) the pedestrian bridge.

Victim: I can’t touch. Oh God. Please help me. Help me.

Officer 2: Sir, you need to listen to me. Hey, listen to me. Swim to the pylon.

Victim: I can’t, I can’t.

Witness: (inaudible)

Victim: Can you hear me?

Witness: Stop (inaudible) Get off of me. He didn’t do nothing wrong. Babe.

Officer 1: We didn’t say he did anything wrong.

Officer 2: Get off of the bridge.

Witness: (inaudible)

Officer 1: You need to chill out.

Witness: I love, I love him. Please stop being so aggressive.

Officer 2: Stop

Witness: Oh, my god is he okay? Stop, why are you doing this? I'm trying to help my fucking, please don't (inaudible). Dude, what the fuck? You are the one that was aggressive with me when you arrested me last time. I know it.

Officer 1: Hey, stop. If you want to help your husband, then talk to your husband, talk to your husband into coming over.

City fire department divers recovered Sean Bickings' body and pronounced him dead a little before 11:30 a.m.

City officials were prompt with the damage control boiler plate. "The original police statement said that officers 'immediately' started rescue efforts and that Bickings 'was uncooperative,'" according to a *USA Today* report. Calling the drowning a tragedy, the city manager and the police chief said that the officers were put on leave and that the Arizona Department of Public Safety and Scottsdale Police had been called in to examine the police response.

The Tempe Officers Association released a statement calling the drowning "a human tragedy" and "an awful loss of life," and claiming that the officers had no training in water rescues or any equipment to do so and that they had followed the correct protocol. It said that it will "work for a change" in how the city and the Tempe Police Department "approach potential water incidents in Tempe Town Lake, including instituting training and equipment changes."

"We will work with the city and the community to ensure that such an incident never happens again," the statement concluded.

More video camera footage, again edited, is supposed to be released in the near future. The Tempe city website said that the Tempe Police Department investigation "could take many weeks due to the need to wait for medical examiner and toxicology results." The same holds true for the Scottsdale PD's

investigation.

This event occurred just a few days after the massacre at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas where police stood by for 90 minutes as a gunman massacred 19 students and two teachers. Bickings' drowning and its aftermath will do nothing to diminish the growing popular awareness of police indifference toward those the population is told they are sworn to "serve and protect."

The police are given billions of dollars in federal, state and local funding every year not to protect the working class and save lives but to protect the property interests of the capitalist ruling class. It is for this reason the police are given broad legal authority to harass, beat and kill—resulting in more than 1,000 deaths at their hands every year.



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