

Hot line to take `police abuse' calls

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The San Diego chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union yesterday began operating a 24-hour telephone hot line that people can call to report police abuse and to receive advice about their civil rights.

Michael Crowley, chairman of the ACLU's Police Practices Committee, said at a press briefing that the new service will allow ACLU attorneys to gauge the level and type of misconduct, as well as monitor abuse by law enforcement officers in general.

"We'll look for patterns, the root cause of abuse," said Betty Wheeler, the ACLU's legal director.

Acting San Diego Police Chief Bob Burgreen said he has no problem with the hot line.

"If they want to do that, I think that's their business," he said. "We welcome and accept citizen complaints from any agency. If they want to turn them over, we'll investigate them."

ACLU officials said the hot line is necessary because of what they see as mounting evidence of misconduct by law enforcement officials, Crowley said. One still unfolding case involves scores of county residents who claim they were beaten, chained, stripped or held naked in county jails.

Seated at Crowley's side at the press conference was Jim Butler, a hot-line volunteer and Vista contractor who contends he was beaten at the Vista jail two years ago after being arrested for interfering with an officer.

Crowley, who represents Butler, said the ACLU plans to store the hot-line information in a computer and release it to ACLU and private attorneys involved in police-abuse litigation and to community groups that monitor police activity.

He said that the new service will direct victims to the Lawyer Referral and Information Service of the San Diego County Bar Association. Attorneys who have already committed to the ACLU effort include Paul Sorrentino, Tom Adler, Michael Marrinan, Thomas Homann and George Weingarten.

Crowley said it is difficult for individuals to find lawyers to take on police-abuse cases. Jury verdicts in cases of this type are low and, in most instances, clients are too poor to pay lawyer fees, so court costs "come out of attorney's pockets," he said.

Daniel Weber, president of the San Diego chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said that the hot line should provide needed relief for the NAACP, which regularly receives calls from minorities about alleged police harassment. He said the organization does not have the resources to handle such complaints.

"There's deep racism here," said Weber, who also is a member of the ACLU board and Police Practices Committee. "This will help us take off some our load."

Wheeler said it is possible that information chronicled by the volunteers might impel the ACLU to start a court action. "But it's more likely that other lawyers litigating police misconduct cases would use information gathered through our hot line to establish patterns," she said.

The hot line number is 238-1043.

Calls will be taken by three ACLU trained volunteers -- a retired lawyer, a paralegal student and Butler.

Credit: Staff Writer

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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