

## **`Police abuse' hot line activated by rights group**

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Author: Linda Keene

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### **Document Text**

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A civil-rights group activated a "police abuse" hot line yesterday and its phones have been ringing steadily.

In the first 24 hours of operation, nearly 50 people called with complaints or inquiries about alleged police misconduct or harassment. The local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union announced the creation of the hot line during a press conference.

"We got a call from someone complaining about a situation in which there was some roughing up of arrestees," said Betty Wheeler, legal director of the San Diego-Imperial County chapter of the ACLU. "They said they experienced some injuries from handcuffs and shoulder braces."

Of course, cranks were also quick to call, Wheeler said. But she said the project would help document legitimate complaints of citizens and could become the basis for future legal action.

Police and Sheriff's Department spokesmen said the ACLU had not notified them about the hot line, but said they had no qualms about it.

Wheeler said the 24-hour hot line will be staffed during the day by volunteers and will record messages at night. Operators will provide basic information about the legal rights of people stopped and questioned by police and will refer them to lawyers for assistance. The hot-line number is 238-1043.

The ACLU also will begin distributing wallet-size pamphlets that don't mince words about "Your Rights and the Police."

"What you say to the police is always important," the pamphlet says. "What you say can be used against you, and it can give the police an excuse to arrest you, especially if you 'bad-mouth' a police officer."

Michael Crowley, chairman of the ACLU's Police Practices Committee, said the bluntly worded brochure and the hot line are needed to curb abusive police procedures.

"We should not allow abuse to go on in the streets or in the jails," said Crowley, a defense attorney. "Regardless of whether a person has been arrested or charged, they have the same rights and do not deserve to be beaten up just because they've been arrested."

Crowley noted the recent spate of highly publicized complaints against sheriff's deputies in the jails. The hot line, he said, would help the ACLU collect data on such incidents and would identify abusive behavior by patrol officers.

He also predicted that the project -- the first of its kind in the county -- would ruffle some law-enforcement feathers.

But a San Diego Police Department spokesman said the hot line is welcome.

"If they're disseminating information making clear the rights of citizens, we have no quarrel with that," said Cmdr. Keith Enerson. "If patterns of misconduct by any officers are discovered, we want to know about that probably more than anyone else. I don't see an adversarial relationship."

That sentiment was echoed by Sheriff's Department spokesman Sgt. Bob Takeshta. "From the Sheriff's Department standpoint, we don't see anything adverse about it.

"We feel very comfortable with our complaint procedure. We receive complaints periodically and when we do, we investigate," he said.

Others are less confident about the agencies' ability to police themselves.

"It (police misconduct) is a very, very serious problem in the communities of people of color," said Daniel Weber, president of the San Diego chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "There is a mentality that manifests itself among policemen that they are occupational forces."

One hot-line volunteer, Jim Butler, said yesterday that he had offered his services because of his negative experiences with police.

Butler said he was falsely arrested and then beaten in the Vista jail three years ago. He has filed a lawsuit against the Sheriff's Department and the county.

"There are a lot of good officers out there," Butler said during the press conference. "These people will welcome the weeding out of the abusive ones. It won't be entirely a bad omen for the police."

Credit: Tribune Staff Writer

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#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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