

# South Bend Tribune

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## Viewpoint: South Bend must do more to lead on police issues

**Darryl Heller** South Bend Tribune

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To date, South Bend has escaped the turmoil that has rocked many cities in the aftermath of questionable police actions that too often resulted in the death of unarmed black men, women and children.

However, a string of recent police incidents that have led to allegations of abuse by the South Bend police are, or should be, troubling to all South Bend residents.

Although these incidents have received wide attention, it is useful to recap them one more time.

The altercation that made national news involved 17-year-old DeShawn Franklin and his family. In 2012, Franklin was asleep in his bed when, unbeknownst to him, three white policemen came to the door of his house with all of their power, guns and badges.

According to reports, the officers entered the home without permission and, without warning or provocation, tried to handcuff the sleeping teenager. In response to acting in self-defense, Franklin was punched repeatedly and police deployed a Taser in order to subdue him.

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Only when Franklin was dragged out to the patrol car did the officers consider that they may have had the wrong man. Even then, they considered charging him with resisting arrest!

The end of this sad tale is that despite a jury finding the officers guilty of violating the constitutional rights of the Franklin family and an internal police investigation that found that the officers entered the Franklin home wrongfully, their only punishment was a written reprimand and additional training on civil rights.

Apparently the civil rights training didn't take, because two years later, the same three officers had another complaint lodged against them for violating a citizen's rights.

In this instance, the officers operated as if they were at a frat party hazing hapless pledges by bullying a 7-Eleven store clerk into swallowing a tablespoon of cinnamon. In this case, the officers were suspended without pay for an indeterminate period.

The public record shows that at least one officer, Aaron Knepper, has been at the center of two additional controversies — one in 2014 in which he had an altercation with a resident on Sunnymede Avenue that resulted in a serious head injury to the person Knepper confronted for an alleged traffic violation, and an incident on Aug. 20 of this year when Knepper and another officer had a confrontation with a black Notre Dame football player.

To the city's credit, it is taking these incidents seriously. Mayor Pete Buttigieg announced last week that the city is hosting a panel discussion today on "strengthening (the) relationship between the community and police."

The news release quotes the mayor as acknowledging that "this is an exceptionally important topic, and South Bend can lead the way in addressing the issues that all diverse communities are facing right now."

The question remains as to how the city will lead. A one-off panel discussion and additional training on civil rights diversity and cultural sensitivity has proven to be inadequate in preventing these types of altercations. The SBPD and the city must do more.

Recruiting more minority and women officers is necessary for creating a more racially and culturally diverse department. The argument that there aren't enough qualified candidates is not acceptable.

There will never be a demographic shift in the composition of the police if the realities of structural racism that lock far too many blacks and other minorities into poverty, offers them an educational system that serves for many as a pipeline to prison and discriminates against opportunities for living wage jobs is not addressed.

The city and the SBPD must prioritize resources that confront these systems of oppression.

Meanwhile, I think it is time to reopen a public discussion on instituting some form of community oversight of the police department. Community input and participation in local policing would go a long way in building a sense of trust and lend a greater sense of transparency and accountability.

As it stands now, fear and mistrust is the order of the day. We should not live in a city in which a 17-year-old's reflection on his encounter with the police is, "I'm just glad that I am not dead."

**Darryl Heller is director of the Civil Rights Heritage Center at Indiana University South Bend.**