Citizen Oversight Board Commemorates the 20th Anniversary of Paul Childs’ Death

DENVER—Yesterday we celebrated the Fourth of July, a day dedicated to the freedoms that should be afforded to all Americans–life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Today, we grieve that not all Americans have enjoyed the same freedoms and justice as others, particularly those in underserved communities. Today we remember Paul Childs, who was killed by a Denver police officer twenty years ago.

We must be vigilant in our efforts to preserve and defend the individual rights of all Americans, and in doing so, ensure that our law enforcement officers execute their duties appropriately, do no unnecessary harm to those they have sworn to protect, and are held accountable when they do.

Childs was a 15-year-old African American boy who was legally blind, developmentally disabled, and suffered from seizures. His murder highlighted how low of a priority police culture placed on de-escalation and how ill-equipped public safety systems were to handle interactions with community members who had disabilities or mental illnesses.

Childs’ death was not the first unnecessary casualty of Denver law enforcement, but it served as the catalyst for systemic change. The resulting protests and calls for change led to the Public Safety Review Commission being dissolved and replaced with a new Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM) and Citizen Oversight Board (COB). Since then, ordinance and Charter changes have strengthened both entities. They have access to confidential discipline records, make recommendations to the public safety departments regarding policy and discipline, and issue public reports to the community.

We have come a long way since Childs’ tragic death.

- State law has established a duty to intervene, reformed qualified immunity for law enforcement officers, mandated detailed data collection, and required the completion of internal investigations even if the subject officer resigns.
- The Denver Police Department (DPD) and Denver Sheriff Department (DSD) have updated their use of force policies several times, and now both prohibit chokeholds, emphasize de-escalation when possible, and require that officers use the minimum amount of force necessary. The DPD also now forbids shooting at or from moving vehicles in most circumstances.
- Training for the DPD and DSD has changed significantly, with both adding or expanding training on de-escalation, crisis intervention, intervening when other officers act
inappropriately, and working with special populations (such as individuals with hearing impairments, developmental disorders, or mental illnesses).

- Body cameras are now required for both DPD and DSD personnel, and in 2022 over 98% of all DPD uses of force were recorded.
- The DPD, DSD, and Denver Fire Department (DFD) have transitioned from precedent-based discipline to a more consistent discipline matrix.
- The DPD has stopped conducting immediate entry (no-knock) warrants.
- The STAR program, consisting of teams of paramedics and mental health clinicians that respond to certain low-risk 911 calls instead of police officers, has been created, made permanent, and expanded multiple times. It will soon be able to respond to 10,000 calls each year.
- Over 50 mental health professionals now work as co-responders alongside the DPD, DFD, DSD, and Park Rangers, helping uniformed personnel respond to mental health emergencies.
- The OIM has created a mediation program that has been utilized over 650 times and results in high levels of satisfaction for participants.
- The head of the OIM no longer serves at the pleasure of the mayor and is instead accountable to the COB. The Monitor’s job often places them at odds with the Department of Public Safety and senior City leaders, and this increased independence protects the Monitor from political interference in those situations.

We have come a long way. We still have a long way to go. We remember Paul Childs and the many others who have suffered as a result of unnecessary uses of force, and rededicate ourselves to the work of honoring their memories by creating systemic change through independent community-based oversight.

Signed,
Julia Richman, Chair
Denver Citizen Oversight Board

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Incident Details: Twenty years ago, Childs’ family called the police for help when Childs began following his mother around the house with a kitchen knife. The DPD had responded to Childs’ home 47 times before, serving as one of the only available supports when family members needed help. In this case, the responding officers had not been informed of Childs’ disabilities, and the dispatcher had interrupted Childs’ sister and cut her off when she attempted to talk about it.

After ensuring that everyone else was out of the house and safe, the officer at the entrance of the home proceeded to order Childs to come out and drop the knife. Childs shuffled around the door and moved slowly towards the officer, but did not immediately drop the knife. Within seconds, the officer shot Childs four times, killing him.

The officer was not disciplined for his use of force, but was suspended for 10 months for his tactical decision to immediately confront Childs by ordering him to come out rather than speaking with the family to better understand the situation once they were no longer in danger. (A different approach could have empowered another officer with training in crisis intervention or enabled officers to use their
Tasers instead.) While that suspension was initially overturned on appeal, it was ultimately reinstated by the Civil Service Commission and then upheld by District Court and the Court of Appeals.

**Board Background:** The Citizen Oversight Board was created in 2004. It consists of nine community members who are broadly tasked with assessing the effectiveness of both the Department of Public Safety and the Office of the Independent Monitor, responding to issues of community concern, and making recommendations as appropriate. As of November 2021, the COB is also responsible for selecting and supervising the head of the Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM).

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