



OFFICE OF POLICE OVERSIGHT

NOTICE OF COMPLAINT

May 6, 2022

ICMS #: 2022-0351

On May 5, 2022, the OPO received an email complaint.

The complainant alleges: I wanted to bring something to the attention of [REDACTED], or really maybe just your attention. Today while heading westbound on [REDACTED], at around [REDACTED], an APD patrol car approached from a distance in my rear view. On my rearview mirror I noticed a Christmas wreath on the front of the car's grille, with plush reindeer antlers on the front doors. Cute, right? I'd like to maybe put some on my car as the season is here. I'll try to be brief. Yes, this is something small to make a fuzz about. In all honesty, I don't even think this attributable to the person driving the interceptor if the wreath and antlers were difficult to remove before signing for the vehicle for officer's shift. What was installed there before their active time might not be for them to replace or remove. The unavoidable question for me is: "Depending on how long this wreath has been there, did no one, not even supervisors, see this and thought 'this is not the best look?'" If I'm Jewish in the Austin City Council and I happen to carry the Star visibly in my car, or one of an estimated 5,000 Muslims in Austin and I display a Crescent and Star publicly, and I happen to get stopped by patrol car [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] on [REDACTED], I cannot be sure how this officer's discretion will affect our interaction. How much will this escalate? Was I stopped specifically for this while the person in front of me made the same violation and continued undetected for not carrying this symbol? Besides, this type of display is banned by department policy in 972.4.1 and many other stipulations throughout the manual on religious matters. The final consideration I want APD to have is that, yes, this is small. It's just a wreath. But it's a symbol. Humans speak through symbols. "An image is worth a thousand words" with a thousand more actions to go with it that are not said. They're not verbalized; they're acted on. And sometimes even more loudly than actions taken: actions NOT taken. It's not just a question on "why did I get stopped?" but also the question on "why did someone else NOT get stopped?" My question is not so focused on the intentions or biases of this one officer or personnel member installing those religious decorations. Maybe they did it to appear more friendly after tragic years of poor public image and someone thought this would help revitalize it. My question is more focused on the environment that let's it happen: the other officers and supervisors who saw this installed, depending on length of time this symbol has been in place, the next officer who drove this



OFFICE OF POLICE OVERSIGHT

NOTICE OF COMPLAINT

vehicle. Why did NO ONE ELSE in the department intervene and say “hey maybe that’s not the best thing to be flashing around. And it’s not allowed under policy”? It’s just a wreath. And cute plush antlers. Symbols I don’t associate with Hanukkah. I don’t celebrate winter with these objects. These are specific to a religious holiday: Christmas. It’s just a wreath. It’s a small symbol and object. But some symbols are not this small. Some deep biases are not this easy to spot, as in a fluffy wreath. Consider this when thinking on symbols more pronounced and visible like skin color, both on officers, and the public. Consider that White cadets have a graduation rate of 80% in your academy and Whites are still overrepresented in your force compared to the city’s make up of 47% Caucasian and when high-discretion searches selects people of color disproportionately, up to three times higher. While today is “just a wreath”, last year should have been a warning that it’s never just a (insert apparent irrelevant gesture). While some are cute decorations, others are seen as inherently threatening. Finally, while that wreath can and should be taken off the patrol car, there are wreaths we cannot take off season by season. A wreath on the grille, at the end of the day, could give a person of color in any city a fighting chance at fairness, but it’s more likely that other more visible symbols could lead to an escalation.

This notice of complaint is a request for Internal Affairs to initiate an investigation to determine if the employee conduct is within compliance of APD policy, Civil Service Rules, and Municipal Civil Service Rules.