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Rochester Responds to RPD Pepper Spraying a 9 Year Old Girl

By Justin O'Connor
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

On Sunday, a nine year old girl experiencing a mental health crisis was handcuffed and pepper-sprayed by police officers.

Two graphic body camera videos were released showing Rochester Police Department (RPD) officers, called by the girl's mother, detaining the girl who cried for her father.

This incident took place on Harris Street on Friday, Jan. 29 after the child's mother told police that her daughter was intent on harming herself and others. Prior to the release of the footage on Sunday, Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren held a press conference alongside interim Rochester Police Chief Cynthia Herriott-Sullivan and Executive Deputy Chief Andre Anderson. All three called for protocol reforms in response to the incident.

"This is not something that any of us [...] can justify," Warren said. Her speech underscored concerns about whether the involved officers entered the situation with empathy and compassion for the child. "I know what it's like to be a member of a community [...] that feels that at every turn there's harm, there's hurt, and undervalue [...] I'm asking for everybody, all of us, to understand, to hear, to empathize, but, most of all, to act differently," Warren said.

Anderson went over the specifics of the incident and the immediate response of the RPD. "We are in the process of reviewing policies and making changes, right now, as we speak [...] It's not just



HENRY LITSKY / PHOTO EDITOR

A sign reads, "9 years old + CRISIS Does Not = Mace" at the recent protest.

with the officers that were involved; it's going to be something that's extending to the entire organization," Anderson said. None of the proposed reforms included answers to the long-standing community demands to defund or abolish the RPD.

Later the same afternoon, Mike Mazzeo, president of Rochester Police Locust Club (the RPD's bargaining union), held another press conference in which he defended the decisions of the officers involved. "There was a decision, when they couldn't get her into the car, despite everything they were trying [...] there was a short blast of Cap-Stun [pepper spray]. It worked. It calmed her down, it got her in [the car]."

"What we need to do is change a lot of things, but those officers [...] broke no policy. There's nothing that

anyone can say they did that's inappropriate," Mazzeo said. His comments circulated widely on social media and sparked outrage as users criticized a perceived defensiveness and a lack of empathy for the wider community in his statements.

In response to the way the child was detained, Community Justice Initiative (CJI), a local activist group which "strives to dismantle white supremacy in the Greater Rochester region," organized a march. The Monday after the incident, demonstrators moved down North Clinton Avenue to the gates of the RPD's Clinton Section Office to list a range of demands for accountability in the wake of the incident. The demonstration kicked off a week of protests organized by the group. "That was a savage act on a 9-year-old girl," CJI orga-

nizer Niya Shabazz said in a speech delivered to a crowd at the corner of North Clinton and Avenue D before Monday's march. "It's time for us to stand up. It's been time." Later that afternoon, Shabazz spoke again: "Our babies are not seen as babies. The police [in the body camera footage] said, 'stop acting like a child.' She is a child you fucking idiot! That exposed how they view our children and how they view us as a people [...] How could they care for a community that they don't even know? They don't even live in our neighborhoods and they come here and they brutalize our men and women."

Multiple politicians were among the crowd on Monday. New York State Senator Jeremy Cooney (D-56) was invited by CJI to speak against qualified immunity and on

his plans to address police reform moving forward.

Diallo Payne, another CJI organizer, addressed Cooney and the wider group, citing steps Cooney can take to assist CJI's goals: "On the state level, write this down, there's S8668B. So, when [Cooney's] in the senate he can push that. That will allow for private lawsuits against the cops, carved out specifically for citizens to sue the cops in the state law to make it easier."

Monroe County Legislator Vince Felder also spoke, but was quickly confronted by protesters and stepped down. Members of the crowd expressed support for a range of reforms, including defunding the RPD, expanding government transparency, and developing better mental health crisis response tactics.

Over the week, CJI organized two more demonstrations outside of the Rochester Police Locust Club office, during which they reiterated their accountability demands and called for Mazzeo's resignation. On Saturday, they held a press conference on the steps outside of Rochester City Hall with similar messaging and an announcement of support for Nailah's Law, which would prevent officers from handcuffing or pepper-spraying children and require the county and city to compile a list of mental health professionals capable of assisting children after traumatic police experiences.

The Rochester Police Locust Club did not respond to a request for an interview with its president, Mike Mazzeo.

O'Connor is a member of the Class of 2024.

COVID: Last Semester in Review

By Micah Greenberg
SPECIAL PROJECTS

For the first two months of the fall 2020 semester, students held their breath waiting to get sent home after what felt like an inevitable COVID-19 outbreak. Keeping a college open during a pandemic seemed like an impossible goal, and as colleges like nearby St. John Fisher cancelled in-person classes following outbreaks, many members of the UR community worried our school would follow suit. It proved chal-

lenging, but the University managed to achieve their goal of a hybrid semester.

On the second day of classes in late August, New York governor Andrew Cuomo announced that universities were to pause in-person activities for two weeks if there were 100 cases, or a 5% test positivity rate within a preset two-week period. Only a few weeks later, the University published their plan for a potential pause.

The plan included moving all classes fully online, converting dining to takeout-on-

ly, and shutting down in-person activities, library spaces, and athletics. A pause would be temporary, but could last more than the minimum two weeks.

The goal of a pause is to mitigate spread of the virus, increase or free up capacity for quarantine and isolation, and to reevaluate/implement policies to prevent another outbreak, all in order to avoid the worst-case scenario of another full shutdown like the one in March.

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Dr. Chatbot Challenge

By Melanie Earle
FEATURES EDITOR

Despite the daily emails, last semester's Dr. Chatbot rates weren't great, with about half of the student body filling it out on any given day.

This spring, UR is looking to promote Dr. Chatbot usage through positive reinforcement: a semester-long competition with some eye-catching prizes, such as a free dining plan for a semester.

Dr. Chatbot is a daily COVID-19 screening questionnaire that is mandatory for all

students and employees who will physically be on campus that day. A more detailed version is also used by UR Medicine staff.

To encourage participation,

'This spring, UR is looking to promote Dr. Chatbot usage'

Wilson Commons Student Activities developed the Complete and Compete Challenge, which began on Feb. 5, the start of Winterfest Weekend, and runs until May 7.

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