



March 3, 2021

Honorable Xavier Becerra  
Attorney General  
California Department of Justice  
Attn: Civil Rights Enforcement Section  
P.O. Box 944255  
Sacramento, CA 94244  
To: [Police-Practices@doj.ca.gov](mailto:Police-Practices@doj.ca.gov)  
cc: [Liz.Saldivar@doj.ca.gov](mailto:Liz.Saldivar@doj.ca.gov), [Christine.Sun@doj.ca.gov](mailto:Christine.Sun@doj.ca.gov), [Michael.Newman@doj.ca.gov](mailto:Michael.Newman@doj.ca.gov)

**Re: Inclusion of the Antelope Valley in California Attorney General Investigation into L.A. County Sheriff Department**

Dear Attorney General Becerra,

We are a coalition of community organizations and leaders from the Antelope Valley calling for the end of law enforcement violence and racism in our communities, and we were encouraged to see your January 22, 2021 announcement that the CA DOJ was launching a civil rights investigation of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD).<sup>1</sup>

We respectfully request that you include a special focus on LASD's systemic violations of the constitutional rights of the community in the cities of Palmdale, Lancaster and unincorporated communities of the Antelope Valley, the northernmost part of L.A. County, in your investigation into the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

The Antelope Valley has a long history of racism and law enforcement violence, which has only increased as the population changes turned these historically white towns into large majority minority cities.<sup>2</sup> From 1990 to 2010, the Black population in Lancaster grew from 7% to 21%, while the white population shrank from nearly 80% to less than 50%. And in Palmdale, a city even larger with about 160,000 residents, Latinos make up the majority, comprising 60% of the population.

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<sup>1</sup>Press Release, Cal. Attorney Gen., Attorney General Becerra Launches Civil Rights Investigation of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (Jan. 22, 2021), <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/attorney-general-becerra-launches-civil-rights-investigation-los-angeles-county>.

<sup>2</sup> Vivian Ho, *'The Confederacy of California': Life in the Valley Where Robert Fuller was Found Hanged*, Guardian (June 27, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/27/california-racism-policing-robert-fuller-antelope-valley>.



In response to these changes over the last thirty years of this growth, Black and Latino residents have been subjected to various and ongoing forms of racial discrimination and violence.<sup>3</sup> For instance, a 2013 investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice (D.O.J.) found that Lancaster, Palmdale, and LASD targeted Black people with discriminatory enforcement of the Section 8 housing program and that LASD deputies engaged in a pattern of misconduct against Black and Latino residents.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, as reported in 2016, for years Antelope Valley Sheriff deputies targeted Latinos through the practice of impounding cars at DUI checkpoints, most often poor or undocumented immigrants, resulting in unlicensed drivers having to pay hefty fees to retrieve their vehicles.<sup>5</sup> And then in 2018, the Sheriff's Department was again facing new complaints of racial profiling in the neighboring Santa Clarita Valley because a group of deputies were pulling over thousands of innocent Latino drivers on the 5 Freeway in a search for drug traffickers.<sup>6</sup>

Antelope Valley residents have also been the victims of the excessive and deadly force in the community<sup>7</sup> and even in LASD jails.<sup>8</sup> It has also been documented that LASD deputy gangs

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., Kurt Streeter, *2 Arrested After Black Worker Attacked in Lot*, L.A. Times (Mar. 25, 1999), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-mar-25-me-20765-story.html>; Hector Becerra, *Son of Mayoral Hopeful Charged*, L.A. Times (Feb. 21, 2004), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-feb-21-me-hate21-story.html>; Errol A. Cockfield Jr., *Blacks Fear Growth of Hate in a New Antelope Valley : Crime: Authorities are Looking Closely at a Band of 80 to 100 Skinheads Blamed for Several Racial Incidents*, L.A. Times (Mar. 27, 1995), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-03-27-mn-47654-story.html>; Findings Letter from Thomas E. Perez, Assistant Att'y Gen., U.S. Dep't of Justice, to Lee Baca, Los Angeles County Sheriff (June 28, 2013), <https://www.justice.gov/file/414701/download> [hereinafter U.S. D.O.J. Findings Letter].

<sup>4</sup> U.S. D.O.J. Findings Letter.

<sup>5</sup> Abby Sewall, *Antelope Valley Residents Air Grievances About How L.A. Sheriff's Deputies Treat Minorities*, L.A. Times (Sep. 10, 2016), <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-lancaster-law-enforcement-forum-20160910-snap-story.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Rubin, Ben Poston, *L.A. County Deputies Stopped Thousands of Innocent Latinos on the 5 Freeway in Hopes of Their Next Drug Bust*, L.A. Times (Oct. 4, 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-sheriff-latino-drug-stops-grapevine-20181004-htlstory.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Rotella, *Undue Force, Racism Charged in Shootings by Deputies*, L.A. Times (May 21, 1989), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-05-21-me-950-story.html>; M. Dilworth, *Families, Activists Unite to Demand Accountability in Deputy-involved Shootings*, Antelope Valley Times (Feb. 8, 2012), <https://theavtimes.com/2012/02/08/families-activists-unite-to-demand-accountability-in-deputy-involved-shootings/>; M. Dilworth, *Logan, Cobian Families File Excessive-force Claims Against Sheriff's Department*, Antelope Valley Times (Mar. 8, 2012), <https://theavtimes.com/2012/03/08/logan-cobian-families-file-excessive-force-claims-against-sheriffs-department/>; Erika Aguilar, *Lancaster Couple Shot 15 Times by Sheriff's Deputies Awarded \$4 Million*, KPPC (Aug. 14, 2013), <https://www.scpr.org/blogs/news/2013/08/14/14506/lancaster-couple-shot-15-times-by-sheriff-s-deputi/>; *Lawsuit Filed in Deputy-involved Shooting that Killed Palmdale Teen*, Antelope Valley Times (Dec. 20, 2017), <https://theavtimes.com/2017/12/20/lawsuit-filed-in-deputy-involved-shooting-that-killed-palmdale-teen/>.

<sup>8</sup> Joe Domanick *How California Failed Kevin Evans*, L.A. Times (Aug. 21, 2001), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-aug-26-tm-38522-story.html>.



have a presence in the Antelope Valley sheriffs' stations.<sup>9</sup> In 2015, the US D.O.J. settled a lawsuit against the cities and LASD for their Section 8 housing discrimination and constitutional rights violations against Black and Latino residents.<sup>10</sup> And yet, despite more than five years of Settlement Agreement oversight by the D.O.J. Monitoring Team, LASD and L.A. County continue to be out of compliance on the vast majority of indicators, including unlawful and racist stops, searches, backseat detentions, use of force, handling of complaints, and positive community engagement.<sup>11</sup> Today, racial profiling of Black and Latinos residents persists as they continue to be stopped, searched and detained at higher rates than white residents.

In June 2020, amidst last summer's local and national uprising denouncing police violence against people of color, L.A. Sheriffs murdered Michael Thomas<sup>12</sup> and Terron Boone,<sup>13</sup> and grossly mishandled the unexplained public hangings of Robert Fuller and Malcolm Harsch. Michael Thomas was a 61 year old unarmed disabled Black man, beloved father and community member, shot and killed in his own home on June 12, 2020 by an LASD deputy. Despite repeated and ongoing requests to LASD, city officials, and L.A. County, it has been over 37 weeks and the family has no answers, not even the bare minimum of receiving a police report. It is our understanding that the deputy that murdered Michael Thomas was on an internal watch list for deputies engaging in excessive use of force, called "Sheriff's 11."<sup>14</sup>

In 2019, there was another unexplained hanging, and Sheriff deputies forced a Black woman in Lancaster to stand outside naked while menstruating along with her 13 year old sister without a shirt on.<sup>15</sup> Deputies claim they had a warrant for her brother, but he was already in custody in

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<sup>9</sup> Maya Lau, *Inked With a Skull In a Cowboy Hat, L.A. County Sheriff's Deputy Describes Exclusive Society of Lawmen at California Station*, L.A. Times (Aug. 4, 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-palmdale-sheriff-tattoo-20180804-story.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Settlement Agreement, *United States v. County of Los Angeles*, No. 2:15-cv-03174 (C.D. Cal. Apr. 28, 2015) <https://www.justice.gov/file/414706/download>.

<sup>11</sup> Antelope Valley Monitoring Team 10th Semi-Annual Report June 2020 (2020), <http://www.antelopevalleysettlementmonitoring.info/content/documents/reports/10%20Semi-Annual%20Report.%20June%202020.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Fry, *Family Questions Fatal Shooting of Lancaster Man By Sheriff's Deputy*, L.A. Times (June 12, 2020), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-12/deputy-shoots-lancaster-man-while-responding-to-domestic-violence-call>.

<sup>13</sup> Maya Lau et al., *A Search for Answers After Deputies Kill Brother of Black Man Found Hanging From Tree*, L.A. Times (June 19, 2020), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-19/sheriffs-shooting-robert-fuller-brother>.

<sup>14</sup> This troubling history of the deputy who murdered Michael Thomas is not unrelated to the troubling histories of other deputies, including those responsible for the murder of Andres Guardado. *See, e.g., Alene Tchekmedyan, A Wild Ride, A Crash, A Cover-up: Skateboarder Alleges Abuse By Deputies Involved in Guardado Shooting*, L.A. Times (Jan. 25, 2021), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-01-15/guardado-shooting-la-deputies-under-criminthal-investigation>.

<sup>15</sup> Jasmyne Cannick, *Naked and Bleeding: One Woman's Story of What Happened When the Sheriff's Came Through Her Front Door*, Medium (July 14, 2020), <https://medium.com/@jcannick/naked-and-bleeding-one-womans-story-of-what-happened-when-the-sheriff-s-came-through-her-front-bd291d06ac42>.



South LA. The LASD policing ineptitude and terror we have experienced could fill a book, and we have compiled a list of all the deaths at the hands of law enforcement in our communities if your investigators would like additional information.

In summary, we are asking that you include a special focus on LASD's systemic violations of the constitutional rights of the community in the cities of Palmdale, Lancaster and unincorporated communities of the Antelope Valley in your LASD pattern or practice investigation. Specifically, we ask that you:

1. Review the lack of progress and compliance on the 2015 federal Settlement Agreement;
2. Review the ongoing policing violence and history of white supremacy in the region; and
3. Open an independent investigation into the June 2020 killing of Michael Thomas

We respectfully request an opportunity to meet with your team to further discuss our concerns. Please contact us through Lynne Lyman ([lynnelyman@gmail.com](mailto:lynnelyman@gmail.com)) and Ben Stolz ([ben@bowersconsulting.com](mailto:ben@bowersconsulting.com)) from Reform LA Jails which is supporting our coalition.

Respectfully,  
(*in alphabetical order*)

Ansar Muhammad, The H.E.L.P.E.R. Foundation  
Barron Gardner II, Alliance for Black Student Equity  
Beth Cayetano, District teacher, Alliance for Black Student Equity  
Christian D. Green, College Professor, Lancaster Clergy, Democratic Club of The High Desert  
Christopher Galeano, UCLA School of Law '21, Palmdale resident  
Cortez Chandler, Timelist Group, Inc., Lancaster  
Dolores Huerta  
Doretta Thompson, Lancaster School Board member  
Emily Keyes Rausch, Justice for Michael Thomas campaign  
Hal Steinberg, Lancaster Community Member  
Isabel Flax, The SOS 10 Project, Justice for Michael Thomas campaign  
Janie Hodge, Paving the Way Foundation, Lancaster  
Myesha Lopez, Justice for Michael Thomas campaign  
Nashon Mitchell, Paving the Way Foundation, SEIU Local 2015, NAACP AV Chapter  
Ruth Sanchez, Dolores Huerta Foundation, ACLU AV Chapter  
Waunette Cullors, The WOW Flower Project, Palmdale  
Yusef-Andre Wiley, Timelist Group, Inc., Lancaster