

For Immediate Release
Friday, December 8, 2006

Contact: Elizabeth Brennan or Michael Soller
(213) 977-5252

ACLU/SC Acts to Stop Arbitrary Skid Row Searches

Police Regularly Violate 2003 Agreement, Residents Allege

LOS ANGELES – The ACLU of Southern California, civil rights attorney Carol Sobel, and law firm Hadsell & Stormer today asked a court to extend a 2003 agreement that prohibits L.A. police from searching Skid Row residents without prior knowledge they are on parole or reasonable suspicion they have committed a crime or violated parole or probation.

Residents stated that police routinely violate the terms of the agreement, making only cursory inquiries about parole or probation status before detaining and searching people on the street. The ACLU/SC went to court in March 2003 to ensure that those living in the 50-block area of downtown would not face unreasonable searches. The city agreed in December 2003 to limit such searches for three years in a settlement that expires tomorrow.

“Stopping and searching people for no cause is a clear violation of residents’ rights,” said ACLU/SC executive director Ramona Ripston. “Just because someone is living on Skid Row, that does not give police the right to harass them.”

Under state law, police must have prior knowledge a person is on parole before conducting a search. The settlement does not restrict police from doing “pat-downs” for weapons when they have reasonable suspicion of a specific criminal activity.

“Nowhere else in this city but Skid Row do police search you just for walking on the sidewalk, or routinely stop and ask you if you are on parole,” said Ripston.

Skid Row residents testified the practice is rampant in declarations that accompany the motion to extend the settlement. Many had been accosted multiple times by police.

Cecil Bledsoe, who helps homeless on Skid Row find housing, was walking with a cane early this month when police pulled up and forced him and about five other people against a wall. Only after searching Bledsoe did an officer ask if he had any warrants out for his arrest or was on parole or probation. Bledsoe does not.

Paul Johnson, who is not on parole, was handcuffed and searched after he questioned the police practice of randomly asking about residents’ parole status. “Everybody down here is on probation or parole,” he says officers told him before driving him to a police station. Johnson was released without citation.

Shawn A. Robinson III, who has tuberculosis and AIDS, said two police officers approached him last month and asked him to stand against the wall and put his hands behind his back. “As I was being handcuffed, they asked me whether I was on probation or parole,” he said.

“This is further evidence that on Skid Row the city treats poverty as a crime,” said attorney Carol Sobel.

MORE

“The law is clear about who is subject to search, and police are clearly going outside it,” said attorney Anne Richardson of Hadsell & Stormer.

The court may extend the settlement up to three years if it finds police violated its terms.

###