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News Release

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Statement to the Community from Police Chief Jose L. Lopez Sr.

As the Durham Police Chief, I fully understand my responsibility to be transparent on controversial issues and cases, particularly in light of recent officer involved shootings. Not only have three lives been lost in the last few months, the credibility of the Police Department is at stake, which is something we take very seriously. That is why we have asked the State Bureau of Investigation to handle these cases to ensure independent and impartial investigations. Our departmental protocol, not the state, requires that the State Bureau of Investigation investigate officer involved shootings resulting in injuries or death.

I certainly understand the community's concerns about the lack of available information. We realize that during the investigation process, transparency is indeed essential to maintaining your trust. However, I also am obligated not to compromise the investigation by speaking prematurely before the investigation is complete. That would be a disservice to the SBI, the District Attorney's Office and, most importantly the victims, the families, and to you, the community.

In their probe, the SBI speaks with the families of the victims, officers and witnesses. During that time, they keep the department updated on the progress of the case, but not the specific findings because the investigation is independent.

Our Professional Standards Division simultaneously conducts an investigation to determine whether all Durham Police Department policies and procedures were followed. For incidents under investigation, officers are required to speak with a Professional Standards investigator and answer all questions. We always evaluate these incidents to ensure policies are followed, and that we're using best practices.

As I am sure you can imagine, it is extremely stressful for any officer to be involved in a critical incident such as an officer-involved shooting or an in-custody death. That is why it is our department's policy to immediately place the officer on administrative leave with pay for a short time. This is by no means a vacation; it is a time for the officer to go through a psychological assessment and de-stress. When we believe the officer is ready, he or she is placed on administrative duty with pay in a non-law enforcement administrative function, and not allowed to perform any sworn law enforcement functions. The officer is returned to full duty when I feel, based on information I have received, that it is appropriate.

To be thorough and complete, SBI investigations can take months, and once completed, the findings are turned over to the Durham County District Attorney's Office. Once the DA's office determines whether or not to file charges, only then is the Police Department informed of the findings.

Like you, I eagerly await the full review of these investigations. As we wait, please know that thoughts and prayers are with the families of the victims, as well as the officers involved and their families. I appreciate your patience, and can assure you that once these investigations are completed, I will make a full disclosure to the public about each case.