

Suffolk Cops Used Excessive Force Against Advocate for Improved Police-Community Relations, Lawyer Says

BY AMBER WILKINS - JULY 15, 2021



Cindy M. O'Pharrow and civil rights attorney Frederick Brewington. (Photo by Amber Wilkins)

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Suffolk County police officers allegedly used excessive force while pulling from an ambulance a woman who advocates for better relations between law enforcement and minorities while she tried to comfort a Dix Hills shooting victim, the woman and her attorney claimed in a forthcoming lawsuit.

Cindy M. O'Pharrow, the cofounder of the West Babylon-based nonprofit organization Cops N'Kids Long Island, a program devoted towards creating stronger relationships between police officers and Long Island's youth, particularly from Black and Brown

communities, announced July 7 that she will be filing a notice of claim, the first step in filing a lawsuit against the Suffolk County Police Department. She and her lawyer, Hempstead-based civil rights attorney Fredrick Brewington, are calling for three things: The names of all the officers who were present during the incident, an independent agency other than the Internal Affairs Bureau to conduct an investigation of what occurred, and a public apology from Suffolk County to O'Pharrow for the officers' behavior.

"A civil rights lawsuit is likely, unless Suffolk County comes up with their apology and checkbook," said Brewington, noting that it is premature to put a dollar amount on damages sought.

The incident is the latest incident of white Suffolk police officers being accused of mistreating minorities, the most recent of which was caught on body camera.

O'Pharrow said that toward the end of a friend's graduation party in the early morning hours of June 27, an unidentified person shot a young man, who O'Pharrow rushed to help. O'Pharrow contacted his mother via FaceTime, during which the mother asked if O'Pharrow could stay with her son and accompany him to the hospital, O'Pharrow said. O'Pharrow said she "boarded the ambulance along with emergency staff and sat at the foot of the young man's stretcher."

While sitting in the ambulance, O'Pharrow said she was yelled at by an unidentified Suffolk officer who told her to "get the hell off the ambulance." She asked why and the officer repeated this demand. Again, O'Pharrow asked why and this time the officer said, "because there is no room." This confused O'Pharrow, as in her opinion, there was enough room in the ambulance for herself and everyone else on board.

According to O'Pharrow, this is when the officer stepped into the rear of the ambulance and yelled, "Did you hear what the hell I told you? Get the hell out!" and the officer simultaneously grabbed her left bicep and wrist with both hands and yanked O'Pharrow to her feet from a fully seated position with apparent "extreme force," as O'Pharrow notes. O'Pharrow said that when he yanked her, "she felt the jerk in her neck and shoulder and that she hit her right calf on the stretcher, causing pain."

O'Pharrow said she was fearful and responded stating, "What the hell are you doing?" and she noted that while the officer was still holding onto her arm, he yelled at her saying, "I told you to get the **** out of the ambulance." O'Pharrow said he then "proceeded to yank her fully out the ambulance by her same left arm with even more force." Again, O'Pharrow yelled, "What the hell is wrong with you? Get the **** off of me."

She later asked for the officer's name and badge number, but according to her, he mocked her, made indecipherable comments, and laughed in her face.

The lieutenant and another officer were nearby, and O'Pharrow asked them, "So, this okay?" O'Pharrow said the lieutenant originally ignored her but after O'Pharrow mentioned her intention of calling Suffolk's deputy police commissioner and the officer's bosses to inform them of her experience, the lieutenant turned around and said, "I'm the ***** boss out here, you got that? So call whoever the **** you want." O'Pharrow noted that the lieutenant and other present officers continued to make "abusive, dismissive, and belittling comments."

O'Pharrow said: "My rights and I have been violated and if the police are not held accountable for how they treated me, then there is no hope for the countless persons who have been abused but who have no voice. Every one of those officers that stood by and let this happen need to be disciplined. As long as abusive officers are allowed to go unchecked, good officers' jobs become more dangerous. If there can be no real trust, then there can be no meaningful bridge building."

She continued on to say, "What is it that made the police feel that they could curse me out, physically and verbally assault me, mock me, and treat me as if I had no rights that they were bound to respect? How is it that rather than speak to me intelligently, physical force was used without knowing my name and not respecting that I was acting as a requested surrogate to a victim of a crime, not a perpetrator? How could a supervisor witness a member of the public be abused and double down on his fellow officer's wrongful actions?"