

Danbury cop's remark in body cam footage about YouTuber is 'blood curdling,' ACLU says

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DANBURY — A YouTuber may have tried to provoke local officers while he filmed at Danbury Library last month, but the cops should have kept their cool, experts said.

Danbury Police Department is wrapping up an internal investigation into this incident, which sparked a potential lawsuit and First Amendment debate.

Hearst Connecticut Media recently obtained body camera footage that showed an officer told another cop that the YouTuber would have been “on the f***** ground” five years ago and would have been “dead” 20 years ago.

“It’s blood curdling because it’s so dangerous,” said Dan Barrett, legal director with the American Civil Liberties Union. “What the cop said is so incredibly revealing and makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. That public employees would feel free to severely injure or kill somebody because they felt disrespected is, I think, all of our worst fears.”

There never should have been a time — no matter five or 20 years ago — when that behavior from police would be acceptable, he said.

It appears the YouTuber tried to push these officers’ buttons on purpose, said Keith Taylor, an adjunct assistant professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

“The lesson here for police officers is that, regardless of provocation, it’s important to always maintain an appropriate level of professionalism,” he said.

In its internal investigation of the incident, Danbury police found some policy violations, including those comments, Chief Patrick Ridenhour said. As required under the police contract, private hearings are being held over the next week or so before the department administers any discipline to involved officers. The officers get union representation during the hearings.

Five cops responded to the Danbury Library incident. Ridenhour declined to release any names of officers involved in the hearings until after they concluded.

Danbury police should look at the attitudes of its cops and the department’s culture, Barrett said.

“If I were the employer, I’d be thinking: Are we getting through to these people or do we have people who are out on the street who are going to do something violent?” he said.

Comments like this are why some have called for police budgets to be cut and for that funding to be used in ways to better help the community, Barrett said.

“That’s a severe warning to the employer that you’ve got a couple people who have views that for a long time have been way out of the mainstream,” Barrett said. “The challenge for Danbury is to get its house in order.”

The YouTuber, SeanPaul Reyes, who says he intends to sue over the incident, is part of an online community of “auditors,” who film in public buildings, such as libraries or municipal centers, to see how well officials follow the U.S. Constitution. He was charged with criminal trespass and breach of peace on July 15 after a visit to City Hall in which he was recording.

Taylor has seen similar actions in New York City, where members of the public film officers in case they do something inappropriate. Often, the videographers try to provoke the officers into doing something wrong and sometimes win a monetary amount in lawsuits, he said.

“It sounds like this particular individual was successful in provoking unfortunate types of comments from the officers,” he said.

The exchange between the two officers happened after they walked away from the YouTuber, who had asked one cop if he looked at little girls in his free time and the other if he wore a mask to hide herpes, among other comments.

In these situations, officers should avoid engaging with the videographer and call a supervisor, Taylor said. A supervisor was called to the Danbury Library at the time.

Danbury police should address the issue by being transparent, acting quickly with an investigation and holding people accountable, Taylor said.

“But the other aspect the agency has to do is make sure their officers are armed with proper training and clear protocols in terms of how to handle individuals who are attempting to provoke an incident,” he said.