

NAACP gives warning on South Whitehall; Group urges minority citizens to be on alert in dealing with police.

Gamiz, Manuel, Jr . Morning Call ; Allentown, Pa. [Allentown, Pa]01 Sep 2018: A.5.

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FULL TEXT

A month after a South Whitehall Township police officer fatally shot an unarmed Latino man, the local chapter of the NAACP has issued an advisory that warns minority citizens who travel to the township or Dorney Park for the Labor Day weekend to be on heightened alert when dealing with police.

In the rare move, the travel advisory is intended to make people of color aware for their personal safety when interacting with law enforcement and Dorney Park security, according to a statement by the NAACP Vice President Tony Phillips and NAACP Secretary Barbara Redmond.

Township officials called the travel advisory "unwarranted," adding that it "improperly denigrates the men and women of the Police Department who have dedicated their lives to serving and protecting our community." Dorney Park officials said "we want to assure everyone that all are welcome at Dorney Park, and we invite everyone to join us as we celebrate the last official days of the summer and launch our popular fall events."

The local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People identifies the July 28 fatal shooting of Joseph Santos, an unarmed Latino man, by a township officer as one of the primary reasons for the travel advisory.

Santos, a 44-year-old New Jersey man, was at the amusement park for a birthday party and unexpectedly left. About 5:45 p.m., he ended up on the 3700 block of Hamilton Boulevard acting in a bizarre manner, jumping and pounding on cars, ripping a window off a vehicle and asking some motorists for help, according to authorities and videos that captured the incident.

Jonathan Roselle, a rookie police officer, was the first to respond to the call. Before backup arrived, Santos approached his police sport utility vehicle, banged on the driver-side window, then climbed on the SUV's hood and pounded on the windshield, court records say.

Santos eventually started to walk away from the stopped police car, but reversed course when Roselle repeatedly shouted for him to get on the ground. Before Santos could reach the SUV, Roselle fired five shots and killed him, authorities said.

Roselle was later charged with voluntary manslaughter charge, a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison. In announcing the charges, Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin called the shooting "an act of a relatively inexperienced officer," maintaining that he does not believe race played a role in the shooting and that Roselle did not act out of malice.

A few days after the shooting, about 100 people gathered for a vigil to support Santos' family and raise concerns about police violence against people of color.

The NAACP branch also said they are aware of other complaints of white police officers and Dorney Park security officers following and harassing citizens of color, including one that led to the filing of a federal lawsuit for racial profiling in June. "Instances of these nature are widely known among minority citizens of South Whitehall Township," said Redmond, who is also a township resident.

In that case, Benjamin Slater of Philadelphia said he was with three friends at Dorney Park on June 17 when a

security guard approached him, telling him he matched the description of a pickpocket. The guard demanded Slater empty his pockets. Slater was then taken to the security office where he was met by South Whitehall police officers who determined he wasn't the suspect, according to the lawsuit.

Despite that, he was removed from the park, the suit alleges.

"The NAACP Allentown Branch will consider lifting the instant travel advisory when the township and Dorney Park implement reforms and remains available to these parties to assist in identifying required reforms," the statement reads.

In responding to the travel advisory, Township Manager Renee C. Bickel said the police department does not discriminate against minorities, either in its hiring practices or in the conduct of its day-to-day operations. She added that "the township is not aware of complaints about officers following and harassing citizens of color as claimed by the NAACP."

Last summer, the NAACP issued the first ever travel advisory in the organization's 108-year history, warning people of color that their civil rights could be violated in Missouri after the state passed a law that made it more difficult to sue for housing or employment discrimination.

mgamiz@mcall.com

Twitter @mannypantalones

610-820-6595

Credit: By Manuel Gamiz Jr. - Of The Morning Call - mgamiz@mcall.com; Twitter @mannypantalones; 610-820-6595

Caption: Joseph Santos, moments before the shooting July 28 along Hamilton Boulevard in South Whitehall Township.

Contributed photo

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