

## **DC Special Liaison Unit Officers Speak to Second Friday Transgender Community Group**

By Ann Murdoch



*Acting Lieutenant Brett Parsons & Sergeant Jessica Hawkins*

On January 13, 2017, District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department acting lieutenant Brett Parson Sergeant, manager of the District's Special Liaison Division, and Sergeant Jessica Hawkins, supervisor of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Liaison Unit (LGBTLU) attended a meeting of the Second Friday Peer Support Group for transgender people, parents and allies.

The two discussed civil rights protections in the District, the role of the LGBTLU, formerly known as the Gay and Lesbian Liaison Unit, or "GLLU," how trans people can protect their safety and rights in the District, and gave a few dos and don'ts for those choosing to engage in peaceful demonstrations. Hawkins also sat down for an interview prior to the meeting.

The two emphasized that the District has very clear public accommodation laws that explicitly state that everybody has a right to use public accommodations in accordance with one's own gender identity. "It doesn't matter what stage of transition you are in, it doesn't matter what your birth certificate or your driver's license says, it doesn't matter what your DNA says," Hawkins said. If a person is uncomfortable using a restroom when another person is in it, the uncomfortable person can simply wait a few minutes for the other person to finish and leave the restroom Hawkins added.

The District's Notice of Non Discrimination in Public Accommodations is available at <https://ohr.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ohr/publication/attachments/DCGovPublicAccommodationsNotice.pdf>. Hawkins suggested that people can carry a copy of the notice if they fear being questioned by an uninformed individual. Parson said that the best thing one can say in such a situation is, "I identify as female (or male), and I have a right to use this restroom." He said, "We train cops that anyone can use any bathroom. We look at behavior. If there's

criminal behavior, we prosecute.” Hawkins added, “The main thing I want (transgender people) to know is, DC’s still a safe place for trans people. It’s going to remain a safe place.”

The two explained the LGBTLU’s role in protecting the civil rights of LGBTQA+ people, saying that they have a unique role in the force. “My unit is not like any other unit,” Hawkins emphasized. “Most of us have been through Office of Human Rights Liaison training. It something that most patrol officers would never ever do. We have a little more time to pick up what a patrol doesn’t have time to deal with. They don’t have time to take someone from a marginalized community to outreach services, like victim’s compensation.”

Parson described the unit as performing three main functions: “Safety, we make sure you are safe. Witness, we watch over the situation to ensure that proper actions are taken. Document, record what happened.” The unit also conducts training for the Metropolitan Police Department and for officers in the 52 law enforcement organizations that operate in the District. Officers must take a compliance course taught by Parson. “My hope is that Jessica (Hawkins) has a counterpart in all 52 agencies and surrounding jurisdictions,” he said.

Hawkins said in her role with the LGBTLU, she has conducted training for departments outside the District. “We’re the leader. Every other department that has anything even close to us has consulted with us, and we have helped them set up a unit.” Hawkins said that the District is one of, if not the only department to have a unit like hers. She said that New York, Atlanta, and many other large US departments, as well as police from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the nation of Haiti have sought the department’s expertise of setting up LGBT liaison units. “I have actually sat down with Russian advocates and leaders in a room to talk and explained to them what I do and how it works.” She also did summits with Brazil, and countries from across South America, she added. “We reach out, we’re worldwide.”

While Hawkins emphasized that DC is a safe place, she said that hate and bias crimes against trans people still do occur. She said that there are no consistent patterns in terms of geography or type of incident. “We have not seen an increase in hate crimes. There’s not one area or one thing to focus on.” Crime is dispersed throughout the district. Juveniles are our biggest source of offenders. They and family members are the biggest sources of complaints as far as hate and bias crimes and incidents.” She said the incidents range from “calling someone a trans or homophobic slur to stabbing them or shooting them or robbing them.”

Whether the incident resulted in physical harm or an emergency call, both Parson and Hawkins emphasized the importance of victims reporting even seemingly minor incidents. “If it’s not reported, we can’t correct it,” Parson explained. “It’s so important that survivors of crime can cooperate with us and the US attorney’s office,” Hawkins added. The US Attorney’s office prosecutes crime in the district.

Hawkins explained that in many cases, where a trans person is asked to leave a public accommodation, there is no violation of the law, but there is a violation of civil rights. In such cases, she said, the incident can be reported to the District's Office of Human Rights. This office will investigate the complaint, and if warranted, may levy a civil fine on the business. They both emphasized that the majority of cases don't result in enforcement actions, but rather, the business or individual voluntarily agrees to conduct training or some other action to ensure future compliance.

They recommended that anyone faced with an incident of discrimination firmly but respectfully assert their rights, but to not physically resist officers or get into an altercation. Hawkins cited an incident in which a trans woman was using a restroom and was accosted by a Special Police Officer, an employee of a private security authorized to carry a weapon and granted limited powers of arrest. Although Hawkins said the woman was physical larger than the guard, and the guard tried to pull and push the woman out of the restroom, the woman did not fight back. "Our victim said, 'I identify as female, I can use this bathroom,'" and called the police, Hawkins recounted. "The first call went out to the patrol officers. They showed up, they did a great job. They've had the training, they know what to do. They call us, we work with the victim, we make sure everything's prosecuted properly, and all the proper notifications are made. We get the victim where she needs to be then we work with SOMB (Security Officers Management Branch) and we do a little educational outreach with the security management. Meanwhile, that special police officer went to jail, charged with simple assault with a hate bias indicator. The only reason we were able to that is because our victim didn't fight back. "

Hawkins said that even with the LGBTLU's efforts to educate law enforcement officers, some are misinformed of the Districts nondiscrimination laws. "One thing the security officer said was, "That law didn't pass here yet." Because of all the bathroom bills, there is a mis-perception that people can't use the restroom corresponding to their gender identity in DC Hawkins added.

In short, Hawkins and Parsons said the best way to handle an incident in the District is to "comply and call us."

They also provided do's and don'ts for those participating in demonstrations, given the current political environment. Hawkins emphasized that the metropolitan Police Department is there to ensure that people can safely exercise their First Amendment rights. She recommends that before joining a demonstration, people check that the demonstration has a parade permit. This prevents problems with blocking streets. But, she said, "The truth is, we're not in the business of locking people up for exercising their First Amendment rights, even without a permit." She said that if a demonstration is causing a problem, such as blocking rush hour traffic, the police would move to disperse it. But if it is not causing significant problems, "We're probably just going to shut the street down and let you demonstrate, no problem."

However, she advised demonstrators to move away at the first sign of impending violence. “If you see people starting to throw things at officers, or breaking things or start seeing people putting on masks, leave the area. We call those the anarchist groups. Unfortunately, they like to join peaceful demonstrations. If you see that, move away. Once they start throwing things, we’re going to have to take action. If it’s a peaceful demonstration, why do you need improvised riot gear?”

In some cases with nonviolent resistance, it is the demonstrators’ intent to be arrested. In those cases, Hawkins said, it is best if demonstrators simply communicate their intent to officers on the scene. Hawkins said that the way such incidents are typically handled is to give the demonstrators three warnings to disperse. When the demonstrators do not disperse, providing they are otherwise cooperative and peaceful, they will be arrested, cited, and released. In a recent case, Hawkins recounts, “we just hand cuffed them, brought them over to the sidewalk, issued them a ‘61-B,’ a summary arrest, and cut them loose. That was it.”

The LGBTLU has recently undergone some significant changes, Parson and Hawkins noted. In November, the name was change to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Liaison Unit in order to make it more inclusive and recognizable to members of the community, according to a department press release. Hawkins said the unit was recently moved back under the direct control of the Chief of Police, giving them more latitude to conduct their work. Parson, who stood up the original Gay and Lesbian Liaison Unit in the late 1990’s returned to the Special Liaison Division in December, 2016 as an acting lieutenant in a management capacity, according to a December 21, 2016 online Washington Blade article.

**Note: Members of the LGBTQA+ community who need assistance or have questions may contact either SGT Jessica Hawkins on her direct phone at 202-669-1139 or the LGBTLU on-call officer, at 202-506-0714. Dial 911 in the event of an emergency.**

For more information on the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Liaison Unit, see the Metropolitan Police Department’s Special Liaison Unit’s website at :

<https://mpdc.dc.gov/page/special-liaison-division>.

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