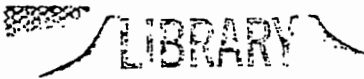


REPORT ON PANAMA CITY

BY THE
FLORIDA STATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
TO THE
UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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PANAMA CITY, FLORIDA

INTRODUCTION

Panama City is a segregated city. Its racial structure can be observed in the pattern of its schools, its public accommodations, its housing, its municipal facilities - except the Municipal Auditorium on the occasion of city functions - its health services, its local government employment policies, its justice procedures. These reflect the chasm that divides its white community of 33,275 persons from its Negro community of 6,149 persons.¹

This report contains the findings of Louis L. Mitchell, a member of the Florida State Advisory Committee, who made a survey of racial conditions in Panama City at the request of the Committee, and the results of a public meeting held by the Committee to assess the situation as it affected Negro civilians in Panama City and Negro servicemen stationed at Tyndall Air Force Base, 12 miles away. The public meeting was held in Panama City on January 20, 1964.

REPORT OF SURVEY

Mr. Mitchell's study revealed discrimination in Panama City in the following areas:

1. Public Accommodations: Of the 300 hotels and motel units in Panama City, 30 motel units are available to Negroes. Five or 6 restaurants of the 50 in the town serve Negro customers on a segregated basis. The restaurants at the airport and the bus terminal are desegregated.

1. 1960 Census

2. Education: Public schools are segregated including the Junior Colleges - Gulf Coast Junior College, a white school, and Rosenwald Junior College, a Negro school.

Panama City is considered an "impacted area" by the Federal government. As such, it receives Federal funds in proportion to the increased requirement for school facilities made necessary by the presence of military families in the community. In the fall of 1962, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which administers these funds, held a series of conferences designed to assist the process of desegregating schools for children of military personnel. Bay County school officials indicated they would apply the Florida Pupil Placement Law without discrimination. Subsequently, the children of two Negro servicemen were prevented from entering a white school in Bay County and the Department of Justice conferred with school officials there. When no satisfaction was received, the Department filed suit against the Bay County Board of Public Instruction.

3. Housing: There are two public housing projects in Panama City, one Negro and one white. Both developments were built about 10 years ago using Federal funds. A city ordinance recently passed excludes Negro women with illegitimate children and all Negro women without husbands, including widows, from the Negro housing project. One private housing development for Negroes, financed by VA and FHA funds, has been built and consists of about 15 homes on small plots which sell in the \$10,000 range.

4. Law Enforcement: At least one Negro leader and one white leader in the community reported that the Chief of Police had acted with consistent fairness.

2. U.S. v. Bay County Board of Public Instruction, Civ. No. M569, Filed Oct. 13, 1963.

5. Municipal Facilities: Negroes are not permitted to use the public beaches with the exception of the one at St. Andrew's State Park which has segregated facilities. Negroes are not permitted to use the Bay County pier which is leased to private management. The Municipal Auditorium is desegregated only for city functions.

Mr. Mitchell's study indicated that there have been no reported incidents of intimidation of Negro voters, of refusal by local officials to register them, or of interference with their voting. The study also indicated that there has been no reported complaint of employment practices at the International Paper Corporation, the city's major civilian industry. Discriminatory signs have been removed and at least one Negro employee has been promoted in accordance with his ability.

Mr. Mitchell also investigated complaints emanating from Negro servicemen at Tyndall Air Force Base. These are considered in detail in the section of this report dealing with the Committee's public meeting.

PUBLIC MEETING OF STATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The meeting held in Panama City by the Florida State Advisory Committee was attended by persons in sympathy with its purpose and persons who were not. Throughout the day, the latter group demonstrated, by interruptions and general demeanor, that it was hostile to the proceedings.

TESTIMONY

Testimony was given on charges of discrimination against Negroes in the following areas:

A. CIVILIAN

1. Education

All of the facts on the school situation presented in Mr. Mitchell's report were verified by witnesses. C. C. Washington, principal of Rosenwald High School and president of Rosenwald Junior College, testified that there is only one terminal vocational education course at either institution. This is a business training course given at the junior college. But, he added, a student who completes this course finds opportunity for employment only in the Negro schools in Panama City so most of the graduates either go elsewhere to complete their education or take a menial job if they wish to remain in Panama City.

Vocational training opportunities for Negroes were described as a great need in the area by the Rev. David Damon in his testimony. The biracial group in Panama City, of which he is co-chairman, is seeking to create these opportunities but, since the city government does not recognize the group as an official body, its effectiveness has been limited.

2. Administration of Justice

Although the police chief himself was not criticized, testimony was heard which described the reluctance of law enforcement officers to pursue investigations of alleged intimidation of Negroes by whites. The Rev. Timothy Youngblood, integration leader in Panama City, testified that in July 1963, \$650 in fines had been imposed on Negroes for demonstrating. On the other hand, no official action was taken when a Negro youth was injured by a car when a white driver deliberately ran over his feet in the presence of watching, immobile policemen. A riot ensued but Rev. Youngblood interceded and took the Negroes away. The only arrests that followed this incident were those of the Negroes who had led the demonstrations.

3. Public Employment

Witnesses testified that no Negroes are employed above the menial level at the City Hall, the Courthouse, or any other public institution. Official boards of the city and of Bay County have exclusively white memberships.

A Negro public health nurse, a county employee, testified that she has full responsibility for health supervision of the 5 Negro schools while the 22 white schools have the services of 4 white nurses. Although the school work load would seem to be proportionate, she also testified that she has sole responsibility for the health problems of the entire Negro community in the county. She spoke of the facilities of the county health department, which are segregated, and to which Negroes may come only on specified days. There is no Negro physician in Panama City.

B. MILITARY

Negro servicemen stationed at Tyndall Air Force Base appeared at the meeting to testify on discriminatory practices they experience in Panama City. Their charges, to which representatives of the group testified, are contained in the following Request for Investigation which was signed by 24 servicemen:

"1. We, the undersigned Negro members of the United States Air Force, Tyndall Air Force Base, Panama City, Florida, having been subjected to inequalities, injustices, and frequent denials of our civil rights as members of the Armed Forces of the United States of America, do hereby request immediate and aggressive action on the grievances listed below:

"a. There is no trailer park for at least nine (9) Negro families who own trailers, forcing these families to live in Panama City, Florida, a distance of twelve miles from the base. There are

numerous trailer parks within a one mile radius of Tyndall Air Force Base. However, such parks are available to "whites" only. The Negro servicemen who are fortunate enough to locate a "Negro" trailer park in Panama City, Florida, must live under conditions that are not conducive to good health and morale, plus the added burden of paying an exorbitant price for second-class facilities.

"b. There are no recreational outlets in the surrounding communities for Negro servicemen and their dependents. Numerous attempts have been made by Negro service personnel to gain admission to various facilities in and around Panama City, Florida. These attempts have met with failure. There are no drive-in movies that will admit Negro service personnel. The operators of the drive-in movies state that they do not have facilities to accommodate Negroes. There is only one regular movie house that is open to Negroes but only on a segregated basis.

"c. The All-State Bowling Lanes, located approximately one mile from the base, operated its lanes on an integrated basis for a period of two weeks then reverted to segregation. The return to segregation of this facility was a result of the following incident:

On November 10, 1963, two Negro airmen and their wives entered the All-State Bowling Lanes and were allowed to bowl. Approximately five minutes prior to their departure, the Negro airmen were informed by the manager that a tire on their car was flat. Upon leaving the All-State Bowling Lanes, the Negro airmen and their wives proceeded to a 'Hotel Service Station' to have the tire repaired. Upon arriving at the service station,

the Negro airmen and their wives were accosted by approximately forty white men. The Negro airmen and their wives were advised by the spokesman of the group to 'stay away from the All-State Bowling Lanes because you're not wanted in there.' The white men then proceeded to attack the two Negro airmen and their wives. The police were summoned by the station attendant. However, they failed to make an arrest of the attackers despite the fact that the policemen were given the license number of one of the cars driven by the attackers. As of this date no arrests have been made.

"d. The All-State Bowling Lanes in question is operated by off-duty white military personnel while Negro military personnel are not allowed to avail themselves of this facility.

"e. There is no club on the base for lower grade airmen and the Negro airmen are refused admission to white facilities in and around Panama City, Florida, leaving no decent places for those airmen to go.

"f. The V.F.W. and the American Legion refuse to admit Negro military personnel to their clubs.

"g. There are no eating facilities available on an integrated basis. The few segregated establishments available to Negro military personnel are unsanitary. The operator of MacDonald's hamburger stand, one of several located throughout this area, informed Negro servicemen that the Florida Health Code prohibits Negroes and whites dining in the same establishment. The operator offered to give any Negro serviceman who was hungry a sandwich at the back door.

"h. Two Negro families (military personnel) enrolled their children at the Everett Junior High School but the children were not permitted to attend classes. They now attend inferior segregated schools in Panama City.

"i. Service stations in and around Panama City, Florida, will service automobiles [belonging to Negro servicemen]. However, these stations refuse to allow Negro military personnel to use the rest room facilities. Some of these stations employ off-duty servicemen.

"j. The Jitney Jungle chain of food stores will not allow Negro military personnel to enter their stores where there are lunch counters.

"2. The foregoing injustices are intolerable and we feel that they reflect discredit upon the United States of America, our nation, which we have sworn to defend to the death.

"3. As of this date, the Negro servicemen are unable to obtain any assistance from local commanders.

"4. It is respectfully and urgently requested that immediate corrective action be taken on the foregoing injustices so that we, the undersigned Negro military personnel, may serve our country in an atmosphere of justice, dignity, and equality."

24 signatures attached

The Negro servicemen at the meeting also testified that their children are taken to segregated schools in segregated school buses. They further testified that when they approached the Commanding General at Tyndall to request that certain recreational facilities in Panama City be declared off-limits for all personnel, the General refused their request saying "there are 4,800 white servicemen at Tyndall and only 280 Negroes."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Florida State Advisory Committee recommends:

1. That the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights urgently request the Department of Defense to rule "Off-Limits" all establishments in the Panama City business community which deny service to any base personnel.
2. That the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights also request that, if business services do not become promptly and generally available to all base personnel, the Department of Defense give early consideration to the closing of Tyndall Air Force Base.*

* Professor Hal G. Lewis of Gainesville, a member of the Florida State Advisory Committee, has recorded an objection to these recommendations. In a letter to the Chairman of the Committee, dated February 10, 1964, he stated: "...I think it is a hasty judgment to say the method by which the Department of Defense should secure equal rights to Negro airmen is by declaring business houses off-limits. The full consequences of such action might be to hurt all airmen at Tyndall Field and not help the Negro airmen. I believe we should call attention to the situation and ask the Department of Defense to inquire into the attitudes and behavior of the camp commanders and to proceed to insure the enforcement of the directives of the President towards discrimination in the armed services. Similarly, that the State Office of Education or some other agency should investigate the use of Federal funds for impacted areas in segregated schools. ...to say flatly, if such does not happen, the government should close Tyndall Air Force Base is just too much an absolute and ultimate recommendation. ..."