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February 18, 1964

Mr. Richard V. Marks  
Secretary-Director  
Commission on Community Relations  
1106 Water Board Building  
Detroit, Michigan

Dear Mr. Marks:

On Tuesday evening, February 4, I went to the 5th Precinct of the Detroit Police Department in connection with the arrest of 10 youth members of the NAACP between the ages of 12 and 15 who had been involved that afternoon in a demonstration before a market on the far east side. With me at the precinct station were the acting President of the NAACP, Rev. James E. Wadsworth, Jr., the Chairman of the Legal Committee, Mr. Bruce Miller and Mr. A. Ulmer, Jr. Our concern at that time was that these 10 young people had been arrested growing out of an incident on a picket line organized by the NAACP and were being detained by the precinct officers as ordinary juvenile offenders. The lieutenant in charge of the station decided that these 10 people should be sent to the youth home, and that one of the group was to be charged with felonious assault against a police officer.

One aspect of this situation which disturbed us was that while we were present in the station attempting to find some remedy, all the staff members of the Police Department Community Relations Bureau, lead by its Director, Inspector William Harcourt came to the 5th Precinct station and went into the basement of the station to conduct a forum with community leaders. There was no contact between precinct leaders and the Community Relations staff people in connection with the serious problem present in the station at that time. There was no indication of any interest on the part of precinct officials to use Inspector Harcourt and his staff. We find this incongruous to say the least and a very sad indication of the lack of status. Active responsibility and proper use of an agency of the Police Department in which the community has been lead to feel it can have some confidence for dealing with problems in this area of community interest.

I hope that you will share this concern with your commission as well as the Commissioner of Police. In my opinion the Community Relations Bureau is definitely set aside from the active administration of Police-Community Relations affairs.

Last week in a meeting with Commissioner Girardin we expressed this same judgement but we feel that much more has to be done and said before the reality of this situation is fully appreciated by all concerned.

To return to the situation which developed on February 4th, regarding our picketing at a neighborhood market, let me emphasize that there are two or three basic considerations which we feel must be of concern to the Commission as well as to the Police Department:

1. Picketing in connection with any civil rights issue and discrimination problem in this community inevitably involves community and city policy in the policing and control of these kinds of situations. Quite obviously such picketing must involve some understanding on the part of appropriate police officials.
2. If the Police Department's Police Community Relations Bureau, ably staffed and headed by an Inspector in the department is not going to function effectively in the area of civil rights and Police Community Relations problems, not merely at the problem level but at the policy level, then what is to be the role of this Bureau in the department? We see no evidence at this point of any vital use of the potential influence of this agency in the department, for the development of correct policy.
3. In connection with the preceding considerations, a third problem is brought into focus by the incident of last week. That problem is how can a situation of bad police management or potentially explosive situation as this one was be quickly checked by responsible officials acting at the area of this kind of community relations problem. It would seem logically that the Community Relations Bureau could carry this responsibility. It is not doing so at the present time.

I am pleased to say that in our conference with the Commissioner of Police, the Commissioner gave a very sympathetic ear to our complaints and some of the specific difficulties which we have tried to bring into focus in this letter. At this point we are convinced that he wants to improve the department's operation and image in this area. The test of policy and sincerity however, will remain in what is actually achieved.

Sincerely yours,

Arthur L. Johnson  
Executive Secretary