

# **Kennedy Plaza – Police Observation Project**



# **Copwatch Manual**

**(updated May 2026)**

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# **Kennedy Plaza Police Observation Project**

## **(KP-POP)**

### **Who we are:**

We are members of the Providence General Assembly Unhoused Solidarity working group, members of Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project, and other concerned members of the community.

The Unhoused Solidarity Working Group is a project of the Providence General Assembly, and our main project is this Kennedy Plaza – Police Observation Project. The PGA exists as an open, democratic movement space that meets biweekly, where all antifascist and truly progressive forces can coordinate and strategize a way to fight back, a way to build a better world.

The Providence General Assembly's purpose is to:

- 1) Defend peoples and communities under attack.
- 2) Struggle to expand the power of workers, tenants, students, etc.
- 3) Build lasting popular power that helps foster a truly free society.

We observe in teams of 2 or 3 – paired housed and unhoused observers, who have been trained in how to safely document harassment and to approach people afterwards.

Part of our work is to gather video evidence and testimony for an ACLU investigation into violations of civil and human rights, as well as violations of the homeless bill of rights. The Homeless Bill of Rights, among other things, establishes that unhoused people deserve access to quality shelters and to be treated with dignity and respect on the street, and that their constitutional rights are upheld.

Our goal with the Unhoused Solidarity / Copwatch group is to challenge the political and economic systems that produce homelessness (like unaffordable and unavailable housing, substandard health care, shelters with conditions worse than the street), and the institution of the police which has always been designed to control and brutalized people of color and the poor. We are not here to “make the police do their job better.” It is our belief that they are doing what they have always been designed to do. We see our role as one of helping to protect people from mistreatment and to challenge the systems that create that mistreatment.

Antifascism means abolition. Our goal is to abolish the systems that create homelessness, and the institutions (like police) that protect those systems. You may not fully share this orientation, and that’s alright. But that is where we are coming from.



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## **WHAT IS COPWATCH:**

Cop-watching is a form of direct action in which groups set out to observe and document police activity as a way of preventing police misconduct and brutality, documenting police activity, and building communication, community and trust. Using our presence, written documentation, and film, we can exercise our rights and advocate for the rights of others. Copwatch in some form or other has been most frequently taken up by marginalized communities who are most vulnerable to legal and state repression.



## History of Cop Watch:

Black Panthers (1966) means of confronting policing, building community power and visible resistance, and a mechanism to recruit to the BPP.

Berkeley Copwatch (1990) started around confronting police harassment of unhoused people on Telegraph Ave.

Waves of local Cop Watch projects after the killing of Timothy Thomas by Cincinnati Police in 2001. The national WeCopwatch project grew out of that rebellion and was linked up with the Canfield Watchmen in Ferguson in 2014.

BLM-era cop watch past 15 years – advent of cell phones (now near universal) with improving video quality and data storage.

Police body cameras as a reform coming out of post-Ferguson moment. Cops can and do turn them off. Public often needs to sue to get videos – not readily accessible.



## **What the concrete goals are – why we do what we do:**

- Community cop watching has happened everywhere, in the past, in the present, and certainly in the future - as long as police exist.
- We are not experts; we are just sharing our experiences and the things we've learned from our experiences. No one knows everything. Our collective knowledge, experience and collaboration is our strength.
- Cop watching alone does not end police violence. Our primary goals are to document police interactions with the public, especially unhoused people.
- We hope this effort will document harassment and potentially prevent brutality.
- We seek to be a visible presence to the police as well as the unhoused community downtown.
- We consistently converse with unhoused people downtown to inform them of who we are and to get feedback, collect information and make connections.

## **Your Constitutional Rights:**

- ▶ 1st Amendment - Free speech and freedom to record public officials performing public duties.
- ▶ 4th Amendment - Prohibits illegal search and seizure of your person or belongings. (You cannot be searched without probable cause or a warrant signed by a judge.)
- ▶ 14th Amendment - Ensures you receive due process if any of your rights are violated. However: Just because it's legal, doesn't mean the police will let you. Be prepared for the possibility of retaliatory seizure of your camera/phone or arrest of yourself/your comrades.

## ORGANIZING PATROLS – INTERACTING WITH POLICE



One observer should communicate directly with police and advocates for the rights of the person who is being stopped, detained, or arrested.

Approach the scene within full view of the officers present. Keep your hands visible at all times.

Identify yourself as being with the Police Observation Project. Inform them that you do not want to interfere and simply wish to observe. Ask clear questions with a definitive answer.

Police are required to give you their name and badge number if you ask for it. Police are trained to regard all civilians as a potential threat and can be volatile if they feel challenged.

Your goal is to observe and de-escalate. Don't be insulting or try to force a confrontation, which could be dangerous or even deadly for all.

Recognize that an aggravated or antagonized cop might be more likely to over-react or act aggressively towards the person being detained.

## ORGANIZING PATROLS – ROLES

### ***Camera Person***

Focus on getting a clear shot of what the police are doing, without getting too close.

Clearly narrate what you are observing and repeat any information given by officers or by the detained.

If an officer asks you to step back, verbally affirm that you are complying - then point your camera down at your feet and record yourself stepping backwards.



- \* RESPECT THE PRIVACY AND DIGNITY OF THE PERSON WHO IS BEING DETAINED OR ARRESTED.
- \* DON'T FILM SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T WANT TO BE FILMED.
- \* NEVER POST OR SHARE VIDEO FOOTAGE OF A POLICE ENCOUNTER OR ARREST WITHOUT THE EXPLICIT CONSENT OF THE PERSONS FILMED OR THAT OF THEIR PARENTS.

## ***Written Documenter***

Write down details you observe and important info!

These can include:

- The time and date and location (cross streets) of incident.
- Names and badge numbers of involved officers.
- Name of person(s) being detained or arrested and are being taken.
- Contact info for person being detained or their emergency contact.
- Details and plates of any vehicles present
- As many details about what happened and in what order as you can record or remember.

It is also helpful to record what is going on in your surroundings before and after you encounter police.

(Transcriber): If needed, these details can be submitted as part of a sworn affidavit in defense of person who was detained or arrested if their rights are violated.

## WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE IS STOPPED

### **Ask the Cops:**

- ▶ “What is your name and Badge Number?”
- ▶ “Why are you stopping them?”
- ▶ “What Penal Code are you enforcing?”
- ▶ “Where are you taking them?” (if person is being arrested)

### **Ask the Detainee:**

- ▶ “What is your name?”
- ▶ “Do you know why you are being stopped?”
- ▶ “What is your phone number/The phone number of someone you want us to call?”

## **CONSIDERATIONS WHILE PATROLLING**

Talk to people around you and tell them what you are doing and why. Distribute literature – including the homeless bill of rights – if you can.

Be prepared for police to try to obscure the truth of what is going on/ intimidate you into leaving. Don't give the Police any reason to arrest you.

Don't Copwatch under the influence or while carrying anything illegal. Don't even jaywalk if you can avoid it.

The focus should always be on the safety of the person being detained or arrested. Copwatch should be neutral or de-escalatory factor in any given interaction.

Stay on the scene with the person being detained until the Police leave. If the person wants to take action, provide them with an ACLU form, inform them of their rights.

If you can, connect them with local low-cost legal services.

If possible, ensure they leave the scene safely.

**A project of the  
Unhoused Solidarity  
Working Group  
of the  
Providence General Assembly**



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