

# LancasterOnline

## Use of stun gun by Lancaster city police officer understandably generates questions about use of force

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The use of a stun gun on Sean D. Williams, 27, by Lancaster city police Officer Philip Bernot on Thursday, June 28, was captured in this video, which has been viewed more than 2.7 million times on Facebook.

Video of a Lancaster city police officer using a stun gun against a black man went viral last week after it was uploaded to Facebook. According to the Lancaster City Bureau of Police, officers responded Thursday to a disturbance on the first block of South Prince Street involving a man identified as Sean D. Williams, age 27. Williams was told by police officers to sit down on the sidewalk. At least two officers shouted seemingly contradictory instructions on how they wanted him to sit; when he didn't comply quickly, Officer Philip Bernot deployed his stun gun on him. The video had been viewed more than 2.7 million times on Facebook as of Monday.

The video is difficult to watch. And it plays out like a disturbing game of “Simon Says,” except it is no game.

Williams is sitting on a curb as Bernot directs him to put his legs out straight before him.

“Straight out! Straight out! Straight out!” Bernot shouts repeatedly. “Legs straight out, or you’re getting tased.”

Williams’ arms are outstretched; his back is to Bernot.

Williams is still in the process of straightening his legs when a female officer yells, “Put your legs straight out and cross them now” (which seems like a contradictory command to us).

As he begins to cross his legs, he is struck by Bernot’s stun gun.

As Williams writhes in pain, Bernot shouts out different orders: “On your stomach! On your stomach! Arms out like an airplane!”

A bystander yells to the officer: “Oh, come on, brah! You really going to tase him? He was sitting down though, brah!”

Those were our thoughts, too.

City police said in a statement last week that noncompliance “is often a precursor to someone that is preparing to flee or fight with Officers.”

But on the video, there’s no sign that Williams was preparing to flee. The officers didn’t appear to be facing any imminent threat — or any threat at all — from Williams.

Williams makes no move toward the officers — in fact, he continued to sit on the curb, facing away from the officers, until the electric current of the stun gun caused his body to twist and buckle.

At a rally Friday evening held to protest this use of force by the police, Williams told LNP's Tim Stuhldreher that Bernot had been speaking too quickly for him to follow the officer's instructions.

He was accompanied at the rally by his mother, Dana York, who said, "If that was a gun, my son would have been dead."

We admire the dedication of police officers, including those in the City of Lancaster. Law enforcement is dangerous and demanding work, and we are grateful there are good people willing to do it.

But sometimes, police officers — being human — make mistakes. This seems like one of those instances.

Williams wasn't charged for anything he'd done Thursday. He was arrested on a warrant for unrelated charges (possession of a controlled substance and public drunkenness), arraigned and then released on unsecured bail.

So why the use of force?

Make no mistake: Firing a stun gun is a use of force. And it can cause cardiac arrest and death. In 2010, a 61-year-old Mount Joy man died after police used a stun gun against him multiple times. And a 25-year-old Reading man died last year after police used a stun gun on him.

We appreciate that Lancaster city Mayor Danene Sorace quickly issued a video statement Thursday in which she said, "Like you, when I saw the video, I was upset by it, and it is of great concern to me. And we take the use of force very seriously."

She said an investigation was underway, and that's as it should be.

Sorace also said — wisely, in our view — that the incident "affirmed my resolve to implement a body camera program here in the City of Lancaster."

As we've asserted before, body cameras protect both community residents and police officers.

The widely disseminated video of Thursday's incident has been met with understandable concern.

More than 200 people rallied Friday evening on the steps of the Lancaster County Courthouse. The crowd was notably diverse, and those gathered were seeking answers, not vengeance.

"We are not anti-police," said Michael Booth, campus pastor at Water Street Mission. "What we are against is bad policing."

Stuhldreher reported that the rally speakers called for Bernot's suspension, a community meeting with the police and the creation of a civilian review board to review such incidents in the future.

A community meeting seems imperative — the least city and police officials could do, really. While the instinct of some officials may be to retreat, public engagement will yield better results.

Launching a civilian review board would be a much more onerous undertaking. As a Governing magazine article pointed out last year, civilian review boards need independence, authority and funding if they are to be more than window dressing.

A more immediate solution would be a commitment to transparency.

The processes of investigating and disciplining police officers should be as transparent as possible, Tim Lynch, director of the libertarian Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, told Governing.

Not only should officers under investigation be named, but if they were found to have committed any prior misconduct, that should be revealed to the public, Lynch told the magazine.

We wholeheartedly agree with this.

We urge city officials to ensure that the investigation of last week's incident is both thorough and transparent. Transparency is going to be essential in building trust between the police and the community.

The Lancaster City Bureau of Police should share its use of force policy; LNP has requested it but hasn't gotten any response yet.

The bureau also should disclose how officers are trained to use force — and what alternatives to force they are supposed to consider. Does the training cover interactions with people who have, say, intellectual or developmental disabilities or mental health issues? Or language barriers of any kind?

Sorace's video statement last week was a much-appreciated indication of openness, but it was just the start. At least we hope it was just the start.