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March 2, 2023

Chief David Laxton  
Oliver Springs Police Department  
701 Main Street  
Oliver Springs, Tennessee 37840

RE: Criminal Complaint Against Asst. Chief Ryan Williams

Dear Chief Laxton:

As you know, this office received a criminal investigative file for prosecution from the Clinton Police Department following a citizen complaint against O.S.P.D. Asst. Chief Ryan Williams. We have carefully considered whether to prosecute this case and have even performed some independent investigation with your assistance. Chief Williams is a personal friend and, I know, a trusted part of your department; thus making this unavoidable duty uncomfortable. Nevertheless, our duty must be done, so we have completed our process and reached a decision. What follows are my opinions on what happened and what should come next.

It appears that Asst. Chief Williams received a report along the lines that his son was in a fight or the victim of an attack at school and he was called by his son at the suggestion of the school nurse. Chief Williams was at work and was clothed with an O.S.P.D. marked outer garment and drove his O.S.P.D. vehicle to the school to retrieve his son. He encountered an A.C.S.O Deputy/SRO upon approaching or entering the school and explained his reason for being at the school. Apparently, the SRO was not familiar with the events involving Asst. Chief William's son and accompanied him toward the school office. The SRO believed that Asst. Chief Williams was angry. On the way to the office they encountered an adult male and a juvenile male leaving the school.

Asst. Chief Williams apparently broke off from the walk to the office with the SRO without a discussion and returned to his car to pursue a vehicle driven by the adult male with the juvenile male accompanying him who were leaving the school. Asst. Chief Williams then is reported to have activated his emergency lights in affecting a traffic stop of the adult male's vehicle inside the City of Clinton and more than one mile from the Oliver Springs City limits. Reportedly, Asst. Chief Williams believed and may have confirmed that the adult and juvenile males were

the father of the boy who was in a fight with Asst. Chief William's son and the boy himself. Asst. Chief Williams is reported to have approached the vehicle and to have instructed the adult male that he was not free to leave other than to return to the school where a criminal investigation would be taking place. Asst. Chief Williams did make contact with an A.C.S.O. Sergeant over the SRO program and ask that the Sheriff's Department get involved in the traffic stop and/or open a criminal investigation. This adult male called 911 from the scene of the traffic stop and was instructed to go to the Clinton Police Department. Both vehicles then left the scene and the citizen actually made contact with other A.C.S.O. deputies he saw on the street and Asst. Chief Williams had no further contact with him and no Anderson County Deputy arrived at the scene of the traffic stop.

Asst. Chief Williams has responded that he felt a crime had been committed, that he believed the boy responsible was leaving the scene and that he needed to make a traffic stop on behalf of the Anderson County Sheriff's Office to prevent a suspect from fleeing the scene.

Reports from the SRO and also apparently a school administrator who spoke to Asst. Chief Williams afterward indicated that he seemed angry. There is no indication that any A.C.S.O. SRO or other school or Clinton Police official asked Asst. Chief Williams to get involved in a criminal investigation or specifically a traffic stop.

As you know, municipal police officers are vested with police authority by and within their municipality. That authority may extend beyond the municipality for a distance of one mile or under special and limited circumstances, like hot pursuit. In some circumstances officers may make the decision to become involved in making an arrest outside of their jurisdiction or outside of any special limited circumstances but they generally do so without immunity and are essentially proceeding with a citizen arrest or similar non-police authority.

It was not apparent that Asst. Chief Williams had any police authority to act in this instance. In response, he has produced, through his attorney, a recording that was made of Asst. Chief Williams getting legal advice from an Assistant District Attorney General with this office regarding a prior traffic stop he made outside of the Oliver Springs City limits. Ironically, that former ADAG is now our Circuit and Criminal Court Judge. The circumstances of that prior stop were different from this case and whatever guidance Asst. Chief Williams received in that instance would not have applied to this case arising entirely outside of Oliver Springs. Nevertheless, Asst. Chief Williams is understood to be relying on that prior advice for his understanding that a stop of the type made in this case was legally authorized.

I am of the opinion that the stop made by Asst. Chief Williams in this instance was unlawful. As noted earlier, Asst. Chief Williams may have been angry and that anger may have significantly affected his judgment. I do not believe that the circumstances that I understand to have occurred could give rise to reasonable confusion on the part of a police officer about that authority. However, pursuing a criminal case like Official Misconduct against Asst. Chief Williams requires proof beyond a reasonable doubt and I do not believe that the State would be able to unanimously convince a jury that Asst. Chief Williams had the required intent to commit a crime and that at least some jurors may be concerned that there was some basis for confusion about legal authority for a stop outside of municipal limits.

The technicalities of legal authority aside, it appears that many instances of police officer criminality or civil liability occur when officers are unable to control their emotions to the degree that they take unlawful or even illegal actions. To prevent a future instance of this type for Asst. Chief Williams' own good, to protect the public and perhaps protect Oliver Springs from some future liability, it might be appropriate to implement a corrective action plan that includes some education and/or other means of making sure that while on duty or using or displaying O.S.P.D. authority that the importance of that responsibility is reinforced. This is particularly true for police leaders.

I should hasten to note that injuries to and the interest in protecting one's child are the most basic and compelling of human emotions. If Asst. Chief Williams was angry or even enraged, those emotions may have been understandable or even appropriate. In such an instance it is even more important for someone in a position of power or responsibility to recognize such a situation and remove oneself from personal involvement for the very reason that either they are unable to act in a dispassionate and professional manner or even that their involvement might appear to carry a bias or conflict of interest.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have but otherwise will be closing my file on this matter.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave Clark". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D".

Dave Clark  
District Attorney General