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ACLU sharply criticizes “Gypsy Scam” bulletin issued by Arapahoe County Sheriff

(DENVER – July 16, 2012) In a letter sent today, attorneys for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Colorado demanded that Arapahoe County Sheriff J. Grayson Robinson rescind a recent Sheriff’s Office alert titled “Gypsy Scams” that could result in the racial profiling of persons described by the Sheriff’s Office as “Gypsies.”

The Sheriff’s Office bulletin describes a “Gypsy” as a “medium to dark complexioned Caucasian” with “dark hair and dark eyes” who “are often mistaken as Hispanic.” In the document, the Sheriff’s Office warns that “Gypsies” target the elderly and commit major crimes like home repair frauds and burglaries.

In the ACLU letter, Staff Attorney Sara Rich noted that the Sheriff’s physical description of “Gypsies” covered a wide swatch of the population, and the Sheriff’s warning that this group commits major crimes “can only serve to heighten any preexisting biases that community members may already have against ethnic groups that fit this general description, including Latinos.”

The letter criticizes the Sheriff for encouraging the community to regard persons as suspicious on the basis of physical appearance and thereby “subjecting countless innocent individuals to the risk of potential discrimination and harassment.”

“The investigation of crime should focus on behavior, not complexion,” said Mark Silverstein, ACLU Legal Director. “To avoid racial profiling, law enforcement must discard ethnic stereotypes and focus on specific evidence about specific individuals. When communicating with the public, law enforcement must be especially careful to reject profiling and ethnic stereotyping.”

The ACLU’s letter noted that similar police bulletins targeting persons described as “Gypsies” prompted litigation charging a New Jersey police department with illegal racial profiling. In that case, the court said it was “disturbed” by police department alerts which sweepingly referred to “Gypsies” as “transient criminal families and individuals.”

The ACLU demanded that the “Gypsy Scam” bulletin be immediately rescinded. Attorneys for the organization also asked that the Sheriff issue a public statement that:

1) retracts previous comments about so-called “Gypsy scams” and 2) condemns discrimination against any person based on race, ethnicity or physical appearance. Invoking the Colorado open records laws, the ACLU also demanded that the Sheriff release copies of its records related to “Gypsies” and “Gypsy scams” in Arapahoe County.

Arapahoe County includes 13 incorporated cities and towns, including Aurora, Centennial and Littleton. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the county has a population that exceeds 572,000 people. In the 2010 Census, nearly 20 percent of households responding self-identified as Hispanic or non-White.

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