



OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT POLICE MONITOR

City of Madison, Wisconsin

STATEMENT FROM THE INTERIM INDEPENDENT POLICE MONITOR

Re: Completion of Independent Investigation December 19, 2025 Passenger Arrest | E. Doty Street / King Street Area

INVESTIGATIVE STATUS

The Office of the Independent Police Monitor has completed its independent investigation of officers involved in the arrest of Maia Pearson during a downtown Madison call for service on December 19, 2025. This investigation was designated a Public Interest Matter with Special Circumstance status. The Independent Investigation was initiated by OIPM, and was conducted independently of MPD's Professional Standards and Internal Affairs (PSIA) process. The full investigative report will be made available on the OIPM website.

PSIA reviews issue determinations based on MPD Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and recommendations align with those existing policy frameworks. OIPM's independent investigations operate at a higher standard and are not bound by the same evaluative framework.

In an independent investigation, OIPM may find that officer conduct, while technically within MPD policy, is nonetheless unacceptable, contrary to constitutional principles, inconsistent with procedural justice, or reflective of policy deficiencies that must be named and corrected.

Compliance with existing policy does not exempt conduct from OIPM scrutiny. Where conduct falls within policy but the policy itself is inadequate, OIPM will name that conduct as not acceptable and issue recommendations for policy review and change. The findings and recommendations in the report reflect that standard throughout.

KEY FACTS

What happened on December 19th, 2025 should be understood clearly before anything else is said about it.

MPD responded to a call for service from business staff. The call originated around an alleged parking dispute and allegations around a parked car in the loading zone. The passenger was not named, not described, and not accused of any conduct in that call.

Officers ran the license plate and identified the registered owner before arriving on scene. A total of 10 officers responded to the scene during the duration of the incident. 8 police officers and 2 sergeants.

Officers arrived and within approximately four minutes, the driver was under arrest and the passenger was being pulled out of the car.

The passenger remained in her seat, she was seat-belted, and recording. She asked officers why the driver was being ordered out of the vehicle. She did not threaten anyone. She did not commit any act that constituted a crime.

Officers approached the passenger side, while another officer unlocked the car from the open drivers side, an officer opened the passenger door, and an officer directed profanity at her while simultaneously pulling on her. This is captured on video. His first few words to her. "Get the F**k out the car."

She was belted. Officers used force on her while she was still buckled. An officer went to the other side of the vehicle to unbuckle her and pushed her out from the driver's side while other officers continued pulling from the passenger side.

She was yanked out of the vehicle and taken to the ground on a public street in winter conditions. She was in a formal dress and heels as earlier that evening she had attended a gala.

Once on the ground, an officer quickly jabbed his knee into her back before straddling her while she was face-down on the pavement, while 5 other officers surrounded her and assisted with her arrest.

She was placed in a full cage vehicle and transported prone to an empty parking lot. She did not know where she was being taken. She did not know why she was being arrested. She was crying and screaming for help. She said she believed her life was in danger.

She was told, for the first time, that she was under arrest for resisting arrest.

She had never been arrested before in her life.

The initial public narrative released by MPD diverged from the facts on multiple material points. It was corrected only after this office identified the discrepancies and raised them directly with the Chief of Police. The Chief took corrective action and that action is acknowledged. But the narrative that required correction was already public and that incorrect narrative caused undue public perception and harm.

FINDINGS

This office found the following:

There were no commands from officers to Ms. Pearson prior to officers' force. There was no adequate lawful basis communicated to Ms. Pearson before force was initiated against her or the driver. This was a call for service, not a traffic stop. The legal authority applicable to each is different. The misapplication of traffic stop case law to this encounter, applied to a passenger who was not the subject of the call, without any communication of legal authority, is a foundational failure.

Officers pulled on a seat-belted individual without first unbuckling her. Once the seatbelt was discovered, the approach should have stopped, reset, and been assigned to a single communicator. That did not happen. The arrest of Ms. Pearson could have resulted in injury and was chaotic. To the point an officer is heard saying not so many people, twice.

An officer used obscene language in direct violation of MPD policy. It was omitted from officers' reports, yet captured on video.

Based on officers' reports, the charge of Resisting Arrest was the first charge brought and finally communicated to Ms. Pearson. Resisting arrest is a derivative charge. It requires an underlying lawful primary charge or lawful police action. There was none adequately articulated here. You cannot arrest someone for resisting an arrest that had no lawful basis to begin with. The subsequent addition of Disorderly Conduct after an unlawful and unexplained arrest, her screaming and crying for help, was a direct result of Ms. Pearson's fear during what this office finds to be an unlawful seizure. Neither charge reflects independently observed criminal conduct or probable cause.

Prone transport creates foreseeable risk of asphyxia.

Ms. Pearson was not told why she was being arrested until after she was arrested and transported to an undisclosed location. That is not acceptable.

The narrative constructed by the officer-in-charge omitted material facts and minimized the

force used.

The Madison Police Department does not have body-worn cameras. Some findings in this report only exist because Ms. Pearson recorded from inside the car and strangers recorded from across the street. Without those recordings, the inaccurate narrative, officers' statements and reports, would have been the only record.

IPM STATEMENT

The independent investigation for the Madison Police Department arrest of Ms. Pearson has been completed and at the appropriate time will be posted on the OIPM website.

I want to speak plainly about what this investigation means, not only for the individuals involved, but for this community.

This was not a traffic stop. A traffic stop requires an officer to initiate a stop of a moving vehicle based on an observed violation or reasonable suspicion. That did not happen here. Officers responded to a call for service at a location where the vehicle was already parked and the driver was outside of the vehicle when officers approached her. No one pulled this vehicle over. No traffic violation was observed. No stop was initiated.

If someone can call the police and the police do not seek the truth, then the most vulnerable among us bear the greatest risk. Being a passenger in a car is not a crime. Recording law enforcement is not a crime. Asking an officer to explain what they are doing, and why they are doing it, is not a crime.

And yet on December 19th, 2025, a woman who had done every one of those things, was pulled from a parked vehicle by multiple officers, taken to the ground, had a knee jabbed into her back, was transported face-down to an empty parking lot in the middle of the night without being told where she was going or why she was being arrested, and was charged with crimes that have no adequate lawful basis in this record.

If being a passenger is a basis for arrest, we are all at risk. If recording officer conduct is treated as justification for force, we are all at risk. If asking questions of law enforcement is considered disorderly, we are all at risk.

Police discretion is essential. When officers exercise it equitably, with purpose, with procedural justice, with humanity, it is one of the most powerful tools for truly protecting and serving a community. At the same time, police discretion is one of the most dangerous tools police have, when it is used to assert power, to secure submission through use of force, or to cover the absence of legitimate legal authority with charges that were never meant to carry

that weight. Resisting and disorderly conduct are not tools for retroactive justification. Pretextual charging, and the use of high-discretion charges as a cover, will not go unexamined by this office. It will be named. Every time. Just because some actions are within policy does not make them right. When OIPM identifies policies that allow harm, this office will work for policy change. MPD should be leading with kindness, with justice, with policies, practices and procedures that reflect the department it says it strives to be. The disorderly conduct on December 19th, the conduct that created a disturbance on a downtown Madison street, is documented in the report. It belongs to the encounter that officers created, not to the women they arrested.

I want to acknowledge Chief Patterson directly. I believe he wants better. I look forward to seeing his commitment to procedural justice as a standard and I hope he recognizes and acknowledges the failures in this incident and I hope he has the courage and willingness to do the hard work this moment requires. A new chief inherits a culture and is also responsible for changing it. That takes time. I understand that.

But officer discipline and MPD policies, practices, procedural justice and proactive accountability, are not separate from culture change. They are how culture changes. Officers should feel encouraged to slow down, reassess and release in real time. Officers should be able and required to explain why they are arresting someone, why they used the force they used, especially when someone is non-violent and not the subject of any crime. They should understand that abuse of authority has no place in this department and that the culture this office has observed, the subculture endorsed by some supervisory conduct on that night, a subculture that prioritizes submission over service and cover over correction, is not the culture of the officers who come to this work with integrity and care.

If an officer does not have the temperament or the patience to serve Madison's full public, all backgrounds, all communities, all perspectives, with care and with empathy, that is a matter that must be addressed. Policing is not about dominance. It is a public trust. And in that trust, much is given and much is required. Mistakes in policing can cost lives.

I have seen prone restraint and prone transport result in death. I am grateful that Ms. Pearson is here. I hope she is healing. One of my many recommendations is restorative justice, but that would require the officers and leadership involved to take accountability for the harm caused.

To the officers involved: I hope you do not hide behind the protections of policing culture. I hope you take accountability for the harm that was caused and use it to become the best version of what this profession asks of you. That is not weakness. That is the standard.

I look forward to seeing the changes Chief Patterson implements. The best policing is

proactive change. When the right practices are in place, departments do not have to be reactive to harm that should never have occurred. That is the goal. This office will continue to hold that standard, to support what is working, and to name, clearly and on the record, what is not.

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Interim Independent Police Monitor