

Edmonton

Edmonton police guilty in 'sweatbox' case

Presiding officer finds constables' actions not racially motivated

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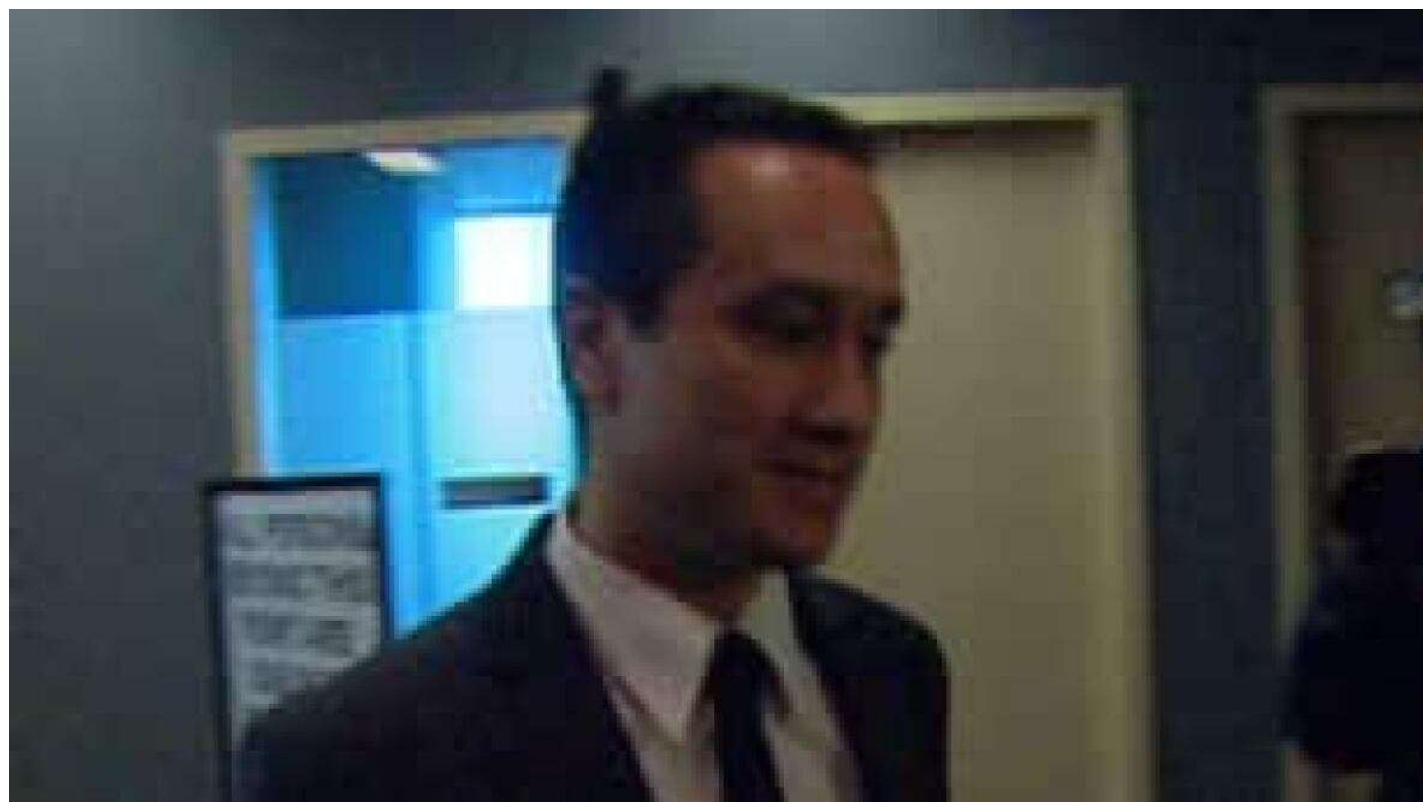
Constables Lael Sauter (front) and Patrick Hannas leave a disciplinary hearing Friday. ((CBC))

Two Edmonton police officers were found guilty Friday of insubordination and discreditable conduct in the so-called "sweatbox" incident, where police rounded up homeless people in a

police van to dump them on the other side of the city.

Constables Patrick Hannas and Lael Sauter were convicted at a disciplinary hearing on three counts each under the Alberta Police Act.

A third officer, Const. Graham Blackburn, was cleared because he was deemed to be only riding along in the police vehicle at the time.



Const. Patrick Hannas leaves a police disciplinary hearing Friday. ((CBC))

The three officers were accused of picking up nine homeless aboriginal people — six men and three women — on Whyte Avenue in May 2005 and locking them in a police van before dumping them about 90 minutes later in a parking lot in the north end.

The case received a lot of media attention. There were questions about whether the officers' actions were racially motivated.

The presiding officer at the disciplinary hearing, Calgary police Insp. Paul Manuel, vehemently rejected this view. After listening to all the evidence, he said he believes the officers had a genuine concern for the well-being of the people they transported that day.

However, Manuel said the incident tarnishes the reputation of the Edmonton Police Service.

Homeless vulnerable, lawyer says

Erika Norheim represented some of the complainants.

"These are highly vulnerable people who can easily be taken advantage of in a way that many other members of society could not be," she said after the hearing. "It was clearly wrong."



Chris Robillard and partner Dianne Wood, shown here selling newspapers, say they were among nine homeless people picked up by police in May 2005 and kept for hours in a sweltering van. ((CBC))

Sentencing submissions will be made in three weeks.

Manuel's finding that the constables' actions were not mean-spirited or racially motivated came as a relief to Edmonton police chief Mike Boyd.

"I am very pleased to hear that," he said. "Very pleased to hear that. I think that casts a whole different light on the whole situation with that finding. And I think that's important."

Witnesses told the disciplinary hearing in June that they were picked up on May 20, 2005. They said the van was sweltering and crowded. Some people had to sit on the floor because there wasn't enough room on the benches. They were hot and arguing among themselves. One woman had to urinate on the floor.

Police finally stopped the van and let everyone out in the area of 81st Street and 127th Avenue.

The incident was brought to light by a story in a newspaper written and sold by Edmonton street people. After a year-long investigation, the RCMP announced in June 2008 that no criminal charges would be laid against the officers involved.

In February 2010, Edmonton police decided three officers would face an internal disciplinary hearing.

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