

PRESS RELEASE

Date: October 12, 2023
Re: Mother and Daughter sue LA County
Sheriff's Department for Violent Tactics
During Traffic Stop of U-Haul Van

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ADVOCATES SUE LA COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT FOR VIOLENT TACTICS DURING TRAFFIC STOP

Horrified mother watches deputies hold her daughter at gunpoint

"I thought they might kill her."

Lawyers from the Civil Rights firm Hadsell Stormer Renick & Dai sued the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) for using illegal and violent so-called "high risk" tactics against Gabriella Koutantos while her mother, Barbara Kappos, stood helplessly by.

On September 25, 2022, LA County Sheriff's Deputies pulled over Gabriela Koutantos on her way to return a U-Haul van she had rented earlier that day to deliver donated furniture to a local shelter for women victimized by domestic and sexual violence.

Even though Ms. Koutantos had committed no crime, never presented any threat, and complied with all police orders, she was surrounded by approximately a dozen sheriff's deputies, held at gunpoint, forced to kneel in the middle of the street, handcuffed, and detained in an unventilated police car for approximately one hour in the sweltering heat.

Attorney Brian Olney said, "This incident shows that the Sheriff's Department is completely out of control. LASD is sworn to uphold the law, but they have a deliberate policy that violates the Constitution every day. It's outrageous. They must be held accountable."

Ms. Koutantos's mother, Barbara Kappos, had been accompanying her daughter to the U-Haul rental store in Ms. Kappos's own car and witnessed the incident. Ms. Kappos watched in horror as the deputies pointed their guns at Ms. Koutantos. She screamed at the deputies not to harm her daughter. "I saw the deputies pointing guns at my daughter," Ms. Kappos said. "I thought they might kill her."

After a lengthy detention, the Sheriff's deputies finally told Ms. Koutantos they had pulled her over believing her U-Haul rental was stolen. In fact, Ms. Koutantos and Ms. Kappos had rented the U-Haul van earlier that day to transport donations to the East Los Angeles Women's Center, where Ms. Kappos serves as the Executive Director. The Center has existed for 47 years and provides a broad range of services to survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

The deputies were following the Sheriff Department's illegal and reckless policy of using "high-risk" tactics during low-risk traffic stops for non-violent potential property crime. In 2014, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeal declared this practice unconstitutional, but the Sheriff's Department has defied the Court and continues to terrify and traumatize innocent Angelenos.

Government data show that most vehicles stopped on the suspicion of being stolen are not actually stolen but are incorrectly listed as stolen due to errors in the stolen vehicle police databases, and that the occupants of these vehicles frequently have committed no crime and are nearly always unarmed.

Ms. Koutantos said, "I was terrified. I feared for my life. I had no idea why the police had pulled me over. They had their guns pointed right at me. I thought they might kill me."

She added, "When I was on the ground and heard my mother's voice, I thought I may never see her again!"

The experience has left mother and daughter completely traumatized.

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