



# Swatara Fire-Rescue

Michael A. Ibberson B.S., CFO

Chief of Department

599 Eisenhower Boulevard, Harrisburg, Pa 17111

Office: 717-564-2551 | Cell: 717-648-2551 | Fax: 717-564-5895

Email: [mibberson@swataratwp.com](mailto:mibberson@swataratwp.com) Website: [www.stfr91.com](http://www.stfr91.com)

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April 30, 2024

## Report: Allegations of Racial Discrimination at Bressler Fire Company

### Background and Initial Allegation (October 2020)

- In October 2020, an individual with 35 years of service in the fire department and membership in the Bressler Club raised an allegation of racial discrimination at the Bressler Fire Company.
- The complaint stated that Bressler station had a policy allowing only white members to join both the fire company and its social club.
- The complainant claimed to have evidence supporting this allegation.
- The complainant stated he was going to report to law enforcement.

### Subsequent Developments

#### 1. February and March 2021:

- The complainant reiterated the allegation to law enforcement and offered additional information as proof.

#### 2. April 2021:

- A member of the local business community reported that a Bressler Fire Company representative, while soliciting donations for the fire company, confirmed the discriminatory policy.
- The fire company allegedly refused black firefighters and denied black individuals' membership in the social club.
- The same firefighter also indicated to the business community member to be careful because Bressler would be the first due fire company for emergencies at the location of their business.
- The complainant wanted action taken on both the admission of the discriminatory practices and the inappropriate comment about the fire service.
- Swatara Township public safety officials consulted with the Dauphin County District Attorney. The County District Attorney referred the investigation and all information to the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office (Civil Rights Division).

#### 3. June 2021:

- A member of the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler reported to Township Officials that they were told by an employee of the Friendship Fire Company, "they better not bring their black friends to the establishment".

#### 4. August 2021:

- A local official from a neighboring municipality expressed concern with the discriminatory practices at the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler.
- This was sent to the State Attorney General's Office.

#### 5. September 2021 – August 2022:

- All information concerning discriminatory practices and related subjects at the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler were turned over to the State Attorney General's Office.
- Additional documentation, allegations, and information from thirteen witnesses were provided to the Attorney General's Office.

#### 6. August 5th, 2022:

- The Civil Rights Enforcement Section of the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office issued directives to Swatara Township:
  - Insert anti-discrimination language into the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler's constitution and bylaws.

- Prominently display a non-discrimination statement on the fire company’s website and affiliated platforms.
  - Non-compliance of the directives risked revocation of support and termination of affiliation with Swatara Township Fire Rescue.
  - The letter states that the refusal of the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler, and its affiliated social club, to take these actions seriously risks Swatara Township revoking all support to the fire company and ending the company’s affiliation with Swatara Township Fire Rescue.
- 7. September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022:**
  - The Swatara Township Solicitor, in a letter advised the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler that they were required to comply with the request of the civil rights enforcement section as a condition of continuing its affiliation with Swatara Township Fire Rescue.
  - The letter further states, please be advised that should the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler refuse to act, it will seriously risk Swatara Township revoking of all support to the fire company and ending the fire companies' affiliation with Swatara Fire Rescue.
  - The Township Solicitor stated, “as a Township with a commitment to diversity and anti- discrimination, these allegations are of the gravest concern. Further, as a municipal entity that receives funding via the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for public safety services in general, and Fire Protection services in particular any such conduct as alleged by the civil rights enforcement section could have the likely impact of interfering and completely jeopardizing those funding sources.”
- 8. September 14, 2022**
  - Swatara Township Solicitor requested the Office of the Attorney General attend an informational executive session of the Swatara Township Board of Commissioners in the near future together with any investigators who may have been involved so that they would have an opportunity to provide to the Board of Commissioners any witness statements, lists of witnesses, investigative notes, complaints, list of complaints, and any other evidence whether tangible or circumstantial that provided the basis for the August 5, 2022 letter.
- 9. July 2023:**
  - Three residents of Swatara Township met with the staff of a state level official and again raised concerns of the continued practice of racial discrimination at the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler.
- 10. September 2023:**
  - The State Level Official confirmed to a Swatara Township official that there was an investigation and the attorney general’s office was involved.
  - He also stated he would be launching his own investigation.
- 11. December 2023:**
  - State level official, confirmed to the three Swatara Township complainants that there were findings in the allegations and that the Pennsylvania Attorney General’s Office was working on the issue.
- 12. New Allegations (March 2024):**
  - Additional complaints were received by Township Officials:
    - One complaint came from a victim involved in the 2021 incident.
    - The second complaint was from a Swatara Township resident denied access to join the Bressler Fire Company social club.
    - The third complaint came from a long-time member of the Bressler Fire Company who verified a longstanding practice of discrimination.
- 13. Reopening of Investigation (April 2024):**
  - New allegations were forwarded to the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General, Civil Rights Enforcement Section.
  - On April 3rd, 2024, Swatara Township was notified that the Attorney General’s office had reopened the investigation into racial discrimination practices and policies at the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler.
  - The current investigation revealed that Swatara Township officials posted the required information from the Attorney General's office on pages/websites controlled by Swatara Township. The Bressler Fire Company moved their club Facebook social media page from a public to a private account, so to date no record of compliance with the directive has been verified.
  - On April 22, 2024, it was confirmed the PA Office of Attorney General did offer meet the request from the Board of Commissioners from the September 14, 2022 letter, but would not share the investigative file. The Swatara Township Solicitor in 2022 declined the meeting.

**14. Suspension and Investigative Review (April 2024):**

- At a public meeting of the Swatara Township Board of Commissioners on April 3rd, 2024, it was announced that the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler would be suspended from service in Swatara Township.
- Firefighters primarily responding from the Bressler Station were temporarily removed from service.
- An investigative review panel began meeting with Bressler firefighters on April 8th, 2024.
- The panel focused on clearing firefighters not implicated in racial discrimination or part of the decision-making board at the Bressler Fire Company.
- Eleven firefighters were cleared after interviews and permitted to return to the fire service with Swatara Township Fire Rescue. Five active board members that are also active firefighters remain suspended.

**15. Allegations Arose During Investigative Review**

- **Applicant Selection Process and Accountability (April 2024):**
  - Additional Swatara Township Fire Rescue firefighters described an applicant selection process at the Bressler Fire Company inconsistent with guidelines set forth by the Attorney General's office.
  - Some firefighters placed blame on others, the board members, or long-standing beliefs.
  - Clarification: There is only one executive board overseeing the Bressler Fire Company and its social club; there is no separate board overseeing the social club.
- **Theft Allegations and Further Investigation (April 2024):**
  - Allegations concerning theft of funds and property at both the Bressler Fire Company and the Bressler Fire Company club will be referred to appropriate investigatory agencies.
  - Information from additional sources is under review.

**16. Continued Monitoring and Reporting (Ongoing):**

- Swatara Township officials, public safety, the investigative panel, and the Fire Service Board will continue monitoring and compiling reports on open matters.
- Pertinent information related to racial discriminatory practices and policies at the Friendship Fire Company of Bressler will be shared with other investigative agencies.

Sincerely,



**Michael A. Ibberson**