

**STATEMENT OF THE  
SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY OVERSIGHT PROJECT (“S.T.O.P.”)**

**TO THE  
CITY OF SYRACUSE**

**REGARDING  
CIVIL RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS OF THE USE OF DRONES AS FIRST RESPONDERS**

**SUBMITTED  
FEBRUARY 13<sup>TH</sup>, 2025**

## **I. Introduction**

The Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (S.T.O.P.) is a community-based civil rights group that advocates and litigates against discriminatory surveillance. Our work highlights the impact of surveillance on Muslims, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community, Indigenous peoples, and communities of color. We write to the City of Syracuse (“City” or “Syracuse”) to highlight the harms of the City police’s proposed drones as first responders (“DFR”) program. We encourage the City not to implement the program. If the DFR program is approved, we recommend stringent regulations to protect the privacy and civil liberties of its residents.

## **II. The Use of Drones As First Responders Allows For the Surveillance of Anyone in the Pathway of the Drone and the Over-Policing of Communities of Color.**

The City of Syracuse’s DFR program claims that the police department will deploy drones only in response to shots fired calls, search and rescue calls, burglaries and other “high-priority” calls, including incidents reported by officers in the field.<sup>1</sup> But police departments’ usage of drones as first responders leads to the increased surveillance of individuals in a drone’s path and the over-policing of low-income, communities of color.<sup>2</sup> This leaves residents, particularly Black and Brown communities, vulnerable to having their images and information collected as they are living their daily lives.

Police drones, equipped with cameras powerful enough to capture faces and license plates clearly while in flight, can amass hundreds of hours of video footage of a city’s residents going about their daily lives—including footage over backyards, schools, places of worship, immigration facilities, and even a city’s Planned Parenthood facility.<sup>3</sup> In Chula Vista, the first city in the nation to start a drones as first responder program, police data from July 2021 to September 2023 showed that, on average, each drone flight passed over 13 census blocks and exposed approximately 4,7000 of the city’s residents to a drone camera.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, police data from the city also showed that students from just one high school in the city were exposed to more than four hours of aerial surveillance over

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<sup>1</sup> *City Seeks Community Input On Proposed Surveillance Technology for UAS*, CITY OF SYRACUSE, Jan. 30, 2025, <https://www.syr.gov/News/City-News/City-2025/2025-01-30-Mayors-Office-News>.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Stanley, *Eye-in-the-Sky Policing Needs Strict Limits*, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION, Jul. 27, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/eye-in-the-sky-policing-needs-strict-limits>.

<sup>3</sup> Beryl Lipton, *Drone As First Responder Programs Are Swarming Across the United States*, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION, Jun. 27, 2024, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2024/06/drone-first-responder-programs-are-latest-aerial-police-surveillance-push>; Dhruv Mehrotra and Jesse Marx, *The Age of the Drone Police Is Here*, WIRED, Jun. 5, 2027, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-age-of-the-drone-police-is-here>.

<sup>4</sup> Dhruv Mehrotra and Jesse Marx, *The Age of the Drone Police Is Here*, WIRED, Jun. 5, 2027, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-age-of-the-drone-police-is-here>.

those two years, with drones dispatched in response to 151 incidents, many of which were unrelated to public safety incidents at the school.<sup>5</sup> Because of this pervasive surveillance of routine life, residents in Chula Vista reported feeling “constantly watched” while performing their day to day activities.<sup>6</sup> In a landscape where the legal limitations of drone footage have not been properly defined—but where some states, like Michigan, have allowed police to use warrantless drone-recorded footage in pursuit of a civil violation<sup>7</sup>—footage from drone technology could be used to collect evidence without judicial oversight and surveil people without limitations.

DFR programs pose the greatest risk to low-income Black and Brown neighborhoods, which are the prime targets of over-policing and aerial surveillance. In 2023, researchers at the Carceral Ecologies Lab at UCLA found that Los Angeles police flew helicopters more often and at lower altitudes over Black and Latinx neighborhoods, even when controlling for income and other variables.<sup>8</sup> In Chula Vista, residents in the working-class and the largely immigrant west side of the city were much more likely to be exposed to police drone cameras compared to their wealthier counterparts on the east side.<sup>9</sup> Public statistics from its DFR program also show that the majority of the incidents being responded to by drones are what experts call “crimes of poverty,” including “personal disturbances” (27%), domestic violence (11%), welfare checks (8%), and psychological evaluations (12%); only about 6% responded to assault calls.<sup>10</sup> Police departments also regularly receive and respond to false or unreliable reports, often concentrated in Black and Brown communities, leading to drones crisscrossing the skies for no good reason and collecting additional data on residents.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dhruv Mehrotra and Jesse Marx, *The Age of the Drone Police Is Here*, WIRED, Jun. 5, 2027, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-age-of-the-drone-police-is-here>.

<sup>6</sup> Dhruv Mehrotra and Jesse Marx, *The Age of the Drone Police Is Here*, WIRED, Jun. 5, 2027, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-age-of-the-drone-police-is-here>.

<sup>7</sup> *Long Lake Twp. v. Maxon*, 15 N.W.3d 118 (2024).

<sup>8</sup> Jacobo Pereira-Pacheco, Kate McInerney, Matyos Kidane, and Nicholas Shapiro, *State Eyes in the Sky: On the History of Helicopters in Policing*, LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS, Oct. 13, 2023, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/state-eyes-in-the-sky-on-the-history-of-helicopters-in-policing>.

<sup>9</sup> Dhruv Mehrotra and Jesse Marx, *The Age of the Drone Police Is Here*, WIRED, Jun. 5, 2027, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-age-of-the-drone-police-is-here>.

<sup>10</sup> *Drone-Related Activity Dashboard*, CITY OF CHULA VISTA, <https://www.chulavistaca.gov/departments/police-department/programs/uas-drone-program>; Patrick Sisson, *Welcome to Chula Vista, where police drones respond to 911 calls*, MIT TECHNOLOGY REVIEW, Feb. 27, 2023, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/02/27/1069141/welcome-to-chula-vista-where-police-drones-respond-to-911-calls/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jay Stanley, *Eye-in-the-Sky Policing Needs Strict Limits*, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION, Jul. 27, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/eye-in-the-sky-policing-needs-strict-limits>.

### **III. DFR Programs Have Been Used to Respond to More Mundane Incidents, Allowing For Greater Aerial Surveillance of Routine Activities.**

While the City of Syracuse has highlighted only high-priority circumstances as the basis for drone deployment, other cities' analogous DFR programs have shown that drone technology is routinely deployed for both more mundane police calls and anticipatory checks, allowing for greater aerial surveillance of routine activities.<sup>12</sup> For example, as part of its DFR program that responds to 911 calls, the Santa Monica Police Department noted that they could send a drone for a periodic check even without a 911 call if they had previously had issues, such as vehicle burglaries, at the location.<sup>13</sup> The Chula Vista police department, which also claims that it only uses drone technology in response to priority 911 calls, has deployed its first responder drones for incidents as small as a "water leak" and someone "bouncing a ball against a garage."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, approximately 20 percent of its DFR program is dedicated to welfare checks and mental health evaluations.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, even more transparent DFR programs, like Chula Vista's, which records why a drone was in the sky for a particular flight, still have gaps in data regarding drone deployments.<sup>16</sup> Approximately one in 10 flights on the department's portal failed to list a reason for why a drone was flown.<sup>17</sup> These unexplained flights also weren't assigned an incident number from the police, which means they couldn't be connected to a 911 call—and nearly 400 of these flights didn't come from within a half a mile of where any call in the preceding half hour originated.<sup>18</sup> These data discrepancies are worrying with such novel technology, particularly since police departments are already using their DFR programs as a way to monitor more mundane police calls and routine activities.

### **IV. DFR Programs Will Be Exploited By the Federal Government to Target Immigrants, Pregnant People, and Protestors.**

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<sup>12</sup> Jay Stanley, *Eye-in-the-Sky Policing Needs Strict Limits*, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION, Jul. 27, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/eye-in-the-sky-policing-needs-strict-limits>.

<sup>13</sup> Emily Sawicki, *SMPD piloting drones as first responders*, SANTA MONICA DAILY PRESS, May 7, 2022, <https://smdp.com/news/smpd-piloting-drones-as-first-responders/>.

<sup>14</sup> Dhruv Mehrotra and Jesse Marx, *The Age of the Drone Police Is Here*, WIRED, Jun. 5, 2027, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-age-of-the-drone-police-is-here>.

<sup>15</sup> *Drone-Related Activity Dashboard*, CITY OF CHULA VISTA, <https://www.chulavistaca.gov/departments/police-department/programs/uas-drone-program>.

<sup>16</sup> Beryl Lipton, *Drone As First Responder Programs Are Swarming Across the United States*, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION, Jun. 27, 2024, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2024/06/drone-first-responder-programs-are-latest-aerial-police-surveillance-push>

<sup>17</sup> Beryl Lipton, *Drone As First Responder Programs Are Swarming Across the United States*, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION, Jun. 27, 2024, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2024/06/drone-first-responder-programs-are-latest-aerial-police-surveillance-push>

<sup>18</sup> Dhruv Mehrotra and Jesse Marx, *The Age of the Drone Police Is Here*, WIRED, Jun. 5, 2027, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-age-of-the-drone-police-is-here>.

The federal government, through subpoenas and other means, can get access to any data that is stored by U.S. states, municipalities, and companies.<sup>19</sup> At a time when the Trump Administration is suing cities to force local law enforcement to collaborate with the federal government's efforts to track and deport immigrants,<sup>20</sup> encouraging states' targeting of abortion seekers with increased digital surveillance,<sup>21</sup> and actively monitoring student protestors,<sup>22</sup> collecting additional drone footage and data puts residents at risk for surveillance and prosecution by the federal government.

While S.T.O.P. has advocated in Albany for the passage of New York For All,<sup>23</sup> until it passes, New York is not a sanctuary state.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Syracuse law enforcement is free to collaborate with United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement ("ICE") to target and deport members of the Syracuse community, with those who have criticized the Trump administration at the highest risk.<sup>25</sup> How will Syracuse's immigrant population feel safe going to work, buying groceries, or picking up their children from school if a drone could fly overhead and give away their whereabouts to ICE?<sup>26</sup>

Video footage from DFR programs in other cities has also recorded residents visiting abortion care facilities,<sup>27</sup> putting pregnant people and care providers at great risk for additional surveillance and prosecution from states where abortion is banned.<sup>28</sup> While New York has shield laws protecting abortion-seekers, these laws can be overcome with a simple federal warrant.

And the threat of aerial surveillance against protestors to chill first amendment activities isn't just theoretical. During the 2020 George Floyd protests, police departments across the country,

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<sup>19</sup> Emile Ayoub and Elizabeth Goitein, *Closing the Data Broker Loophole* (Brennan Center, February 13, 2024), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/closing-data-broker-loophole>.

<sup>20</sup> Sophia Tareen, *Trump administration sues Chicago in latest crackdown on 'sanctuary' cities*, AP NEWS, Feb. 6, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-immigration-chicago-arrests-sanctuary-immigrants-enforcement-df278eba554406c6703bb362d9b09844>.

<sup>21</sup> Eleni Manis et al., *Unintended Traps: Recordkeeping Requirements that Endanger Abortion Access* (Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, Dec. 20, 2024), <https://www.stopspying.org/unintended-traps>.

<sup>22</sup> Sharon Otterman and Anemona Hartocollis, *Trump Order Pushes Universities to 'Monitor' Protesters on Student Visas*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, Jan. 30, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/30/us/trump-executive-order-antisemitism.html>.

<sup>23</sup> N.Y. STATE SENATE S2235 (2025), <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/S2235>; N.Y. STATE ASSEMBLY A3506 (2025), <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/A3506>.

<sup>24</sup> Sanya Mansoor, *The Fight to Stop New York Cops From Conspiring With ICE*, THE INTERCEPT, Nov. 26, 2024, <https://theintercept.com/2024/11/26/the-fight-to-stop-new-york-cops-from-conspiring-with-ice>.

<sup>25</sup> Masha Gessen, *Trump, Shitholes, And the Nature of "Us"*, NEW YORKER, Jan. 12, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/trump-shitholes-and-the-nature-of-us>.

<sup>26</sup> Eleni Manis et al., *Deportation Data Centers: How Fusion Centers Circumvent Sanctuary City Laws* (Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, Nov. 19, 2024), <https://www.stopspying.org/deportation-data-centers>.

<sup>27</sup> Dhruv Mehrotra and Jesse Marx, *The Age of the Drone Police Is Here*, WIRED, Jun. 5, 2027, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-age-of-the-drone-police-is-here>.

<sup>28</sup> J. David Goodman and Pam Belluck, *Texas Attorney General Sues New York Doctor for Mailing Abortion Pills*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, Dec. 13, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/13/us/texas-new-york-abortion-pills-lawsuit.html>.

including the NYPD, used drones to intimidate and threaten arrest against protestors.<sup>29</sup> Police drone programs across the country have since expanded to monitor the gathering of individuals: Beverly Hills became the first in the nation to use drones on routine patrols,<sup>30</sup> Chicago passed legislation allowing police to use drones over special events,<sup>31</sup> New York City police used drones to surveil pro-Palestine protests in Manhattan and Brooklyn,<sup>32</sup> and in Elizabeth, New Jersey, police used drones to monitor a protest by students demanding fewer police.<sup>33</sup>

Implementing the DFR program would give the Trump administration a convenient aerial view of Syracuse with which to target protesters, immigrants, pregnant people, people seeking gender-affirming care, and more.

## **V. Data from Drones Can Be Manipulated and Combined With Other Invasive Technologies.**

Drones as first responder programs are also increasingly combined with other invasive technologies that could surveil Syracuse residents and infringe on their civil liberties. Drones can be equipped with, among other tools, license plate readers, thermal imaging, and facial recognition technology—which can increase the risk that police using these drones misidentify and wrongfully arrest individuals, particularly people of color and nonbinary people.<sup>34</sup>

There are other surveillance technologies that police departments have also combined with drones. A police department in Westport, Connecticut deployed drones coupled with thermal imagery and biometric recognition software that tracked people's coughing, sneezes, heart rate, and distance from one another.<sup>35</sup> The New York City Police Department recently announced that it would expand

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<sup>29</sup> Taylor Romine, *Activist who police tried to arrest Friday shares his experience in standoff*, CNN, Aug. 9, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/09/us/new-york-black-lives-matter-activist-standoff/index.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Sisson, *In (and Above) Beverly Hills, Police Are Watching*, BLOOMBERG NEWS, Jan. 19, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-01-19/in-beverly-hills-police-surveillance-technology-takes-off>.

<sup>31</sup> Hank Sanders, *Bill to allow law enforcement drones at parades and other events passes, despite questions over personal freedom*, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, May 29, 2023, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2023/05/29/bill-to-allow-law-enforcement-drones-at-parades-and-other-events-passes-despite-questions-over-personal-freedom>.

<sup>32</sup> Johana Bhuiyan, *New York City police will send drones to sites of reported robberies and gunshots*, THE GUARDIAN, Nov. 14, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/nov/14/nypd-drones-police>.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Sisson, *Welcome to Chula Vista, where police drones respond to 911 calls*, MIT TECHNOLOGY REVIEW, Feb. 27, 2023, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/02/27/1069141/welcome-to-chula-vista-where-police-drones-respond-to-911-calls/>.

<sup>34</sup> *Street Level Surveillance: Face Recognition*, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION, Sept. 5, 2023, <https://sfs.eff.org/technologies/face-recognition>.

<sup>35</sup> Chaim Gartenberg, *Social-distancing detecting 'pandemic drones' dumped over privacy concerns*, THE VERGE, Apr. 23, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/23/21232592/connecticut-suburb-westport-pandemic-drones-dragonfly-social-distancing>; *Prying Eyes: Government Drone Data Across New York State*, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION OF NEW YORK, Oct. 21, 2022, <https://www.nyclu.org/report/prying-eyes-government-drone-data-across-new-york-state#flood>.

its existing DFR program and use drones to respond to reports of robberies and alerts from a city-wide gunshot detection system, ShotSpotter—a technology that has long been the subject of concern for civil liberty and privacy experts and a tool that the city’s own audit concluded was overwhelmingly inaccurate.<sup>36</sup> Data shows that a disproportionate number of these gunshot detection sensors are located in Black communities in the United States, allowing for the further over-policing of Black and Brown communities with the use of drones as first responders.<sup>37</sup>

## **VI. If the City of Syracuse Implements a DFR Program, it Must Be Subject to Strict Standards and Regulations.**

We recognize that there might be limited situations in which drones can be useful as a first response mechanism, including surveying after natural disasters, building collapses, and other instances where initial video preview might make physical entrance safer. To that end, if the City uses drones as first responders, they should be restricted to these limited situations. Furthermore, the footage should not be usable for law enforcement purposes, and strict precautions must be taken so this use does not evolve into a broader surveillance program.

First, the City must be highly transparent about its use of drones, with a database providing clear information about where, when, and why surveillance drones have operated and the policies that govern their use.<sup>38</sup> Second, there must be strict standards regarding data retention policies and the use of this data. Drones should not record or retain data on the way to their destinations; for any data collected at the destination, this information should only be retained for the minimum duration necessary to ensure safe human response to the situation—likely no longer than 24 hours. Moreover, this data should only be used to determine how and whether a human should respond to a situation safely: no drone data should be used for law enforcement purposes, whether as evidence against an individual filmed in a civil or criminal case or as a basis for additional searches to gather evidence.<sup>39</sup> As a guide, Syracuse could look to the Protect Our Privacy Act, a proposed New York State law to

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<sup>36</sup> Johana Bhuiyan, *New York City police will send drones to sites of reported robberies and gunshots*, THE GUARDIAN, Nov. 14, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/nov/14/nypd-drones-police>.

<sup>37</sup> Sara Keenan, *DOJ Urged To Investigate Use Of Gunfire Detectors In Black Neighborhoods*, PEOPLE OF COLOR IN TECH, Sept. 29, 2023, <https://peopleofcolorintech.com/articles/doj-urged-to-investigate-use-of-gunfire-detectors-in-black-neighborhoods>.

<sup>38</sup> Jay Stanley, *Eye-in-the-Sky Policing Needs Strict Limits*, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION, Jul. 27, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/eye-in-the-sky-policing-needs-strict-limits>.

<sup>39</sup> Jay Stanley, *Eye-in-the-Sky Policing Needs Strict Limits*, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION, Jul. 27, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/eye-in-the-sky-policing-needs-strict-limits>.

regulate drone use by law enforcement.<sup>40</sup> Finally, there should be a ban on combining weapons or other invasive surveillance technology with drones, including the use of tasers, facial recognition technology, or so-called gunshot detection tools.<sup>41</sup> We recommend that the City of Syracuse not approve this (or any) DFR program, but if such a program is implemented, it must be governed by strict guidelines to protect residents.

## **VII. Conclusion**

To better protect the public, especially people of color and immigrants, S.T.O.P. strongly urges the City of Syracuse not to implement a DFR program. If such a program is to be implemented, S.T.O.P. recommends stringent regulations to protect the privacy and civil liberties of Syracuse's residents.

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<sup>40</sup> N.Y. STATE SENATE BILL S1096 (2025), <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/S1096>; N.Y. STATE ASSEMBLY BILL A972 (2025), <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/A972>.

<sup>41</sup> Alyce McFadden, *Gunshot Detection System Wastes N.Y.P.D. Officers' Time, Audit Finds*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, June 20, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/20/nyregion/nypd-shotspotter-guns.html>.