

**CHECK THE
SHERIFF**



December 20, 2021

To: Max Huntsman, Inspector General

Cc: Los Angeles County Civilian Oversight Commission
Professor Priscilla Ocen, Chair, Civilian Oversight Commission
Brian Williams, Executive Director, Civilian Oversight Commission

Via E-Mail

RE: Sheriff Villanueva's Impermissible Political and Campaign Activity

To Inspector General Huntsman:

We are writing to bring to your urgent attention repeated instances of Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva using public resources and his position as Sheriff to engage in political activity with regards to his re-election campaign, recall elections of other public officials, and other candidates for public office. Sheriff Villanueva has likely violated several California Codes and Regulations by engaging in impermissible political and campaign activity. Statutes that Sheriff Villanueva may have violated include California Government Code §§ 3204, 3206, 3302, 8314, 19990, 54964, and 89001, and California Penal Code § 424. He has undermined the integrity of the electoral process and abused the influence of his public office for private gain, as well as the private gain of his political allies. The incidents described below warrant prompt investigation and action by the Office of the Inspector General, in collaboration with any other relevant County departments, to ensure that Sheriff Villanueva does not continue to engage in such unlawful conduct as the June 2022 primary elections approach.

1. Dissemination of Radio Show Broadcast

Sheriff Villanueva used public resources to disseminate a recording of a KFI AM 640 radio show titled *Live and Unscripted*, which he co-hosted on August 29, 2021.¹ KFI AM 640 has the largest radio listener base in Los Angeles, reaching over a million listeners each week.² During his appearance on the show, Sheriff Villanueva made several inflammatory statements

¹ Recording of the broadcast is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CI_5oS40mH8&ab_channel=KFIAM640 (hour one) and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiLezAyIyQw&ab_channel=KFIAM640 (hour two). Sheriff Villanueva co-hosted this radio show again on October 4, 2021.

² According to Inside Radio, KFI has 1,187,400 weekly listeners, see http://www.insideradio.com/free/news-talk-by-the-numbers-l-a-s-kfi-and-atlantas-wsb-top-the-talkers/article_8f665db4-0186-11ec-bdd3-ef81d04cc50e.html.

about other politicians, including Governor Gavin Newsom, Mayor Eric Garcetti, Los Angeles County Supervisors, Los Angeles District Attorney George Gascon, and Los Angeles City Councilmember Mike Bonin, and reminded listeners multiple times to vote in the upcoming elections, with thinly-veiled directions as to who to vote for. For example, Sheriff Villanueva stated, “Supervisor Solis, you may want to really think long and hard about what you’re doing in public office because today I don’t see the point in you being there,”³ and “We need a whole new board of supervisors.”⁴ When criticizing Governor Newsom, whose recall election was underway at the time on August 29, Sheriff Villanueva stated, “You decide if he deserves another term in office or not,”⁵ and labeled him as an “architect of failure.”⁶

In addition, Sheriff Villanueva made numerous disparaging comments about District Attorney Gascon and promoted the failed effort to recall him that was underway at that time. Sheriff Villanueva stated “First thing we need to do is get rid of the District Attorney. I was the first one to sign that recall petition for District Attorney Gascon.”⁷ He also encouraged listeners to visit the recall website and sign the recall petition, saying “get that in as quickly as possible.”⁸

The September 11, 2021 edition of the official Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department (LASD) newsletter included a link to the radio show broadcast.⁹ The LASD newsletter was shared by the Sheriff’s verified twitter account, @LACoSheriff, and retweeted by multiple accounts, including accounts of LASD stations, jails, affiliates, and department members.¹⁰ Many of these accounts are in fact under the purview of LASD Marketing according to a document listing official LASD social media accounts.¹¹ These official accounts are presumably maintained by LASD staff who expend County time and resources to do so. The delivery system for the newsletter is supported by GovDelivery, the same email subscription management system used by the County (see Screenshot A below).¹² It is undeniable that public resources were expended to prepare the official LASD newsletter, to pay for the GovDelivery system, and to maintain staff managing official LASD social media accounts.

³ Hour two, 24:53-:25:03.

⁴ Hour two, 22:20-22:24.

⁵ Hour two, 2:50-3:00.

⁶ Hour one, 18:08-18:35.

⁷ Hour two, 13:56-14:07.

⁸ Hour two, 26:37-53.

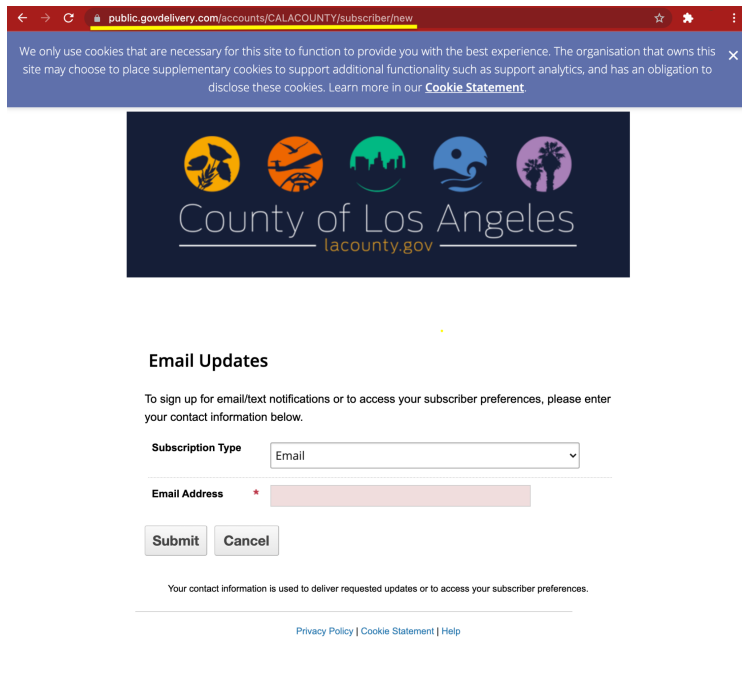
⁹ The September 11, 2021 *In the Community with Sheriff Villanueva* newsletter is available at <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/CALACOUNTY/bulletins/2f05593>.

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/LACoSheriff/status/1436691002941743104>.

¹¹ Social Media, Instant Communication, & Marketing, available at <http://shq.lasdnews.net/content/uoa/SHB/marketinglasd.pdf>.

¹² <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/CALACOUNTY/subscriber/new>.

Screenshot A



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL public.govdelivery.com/accounts/CALACOUNTY/subscriber/new. A cookie consent banner is visible at the top. Below it is the County of Los Angeles logo, which includes five circular icons representing different aspects of the county: a sun, a bridge, a city skyline, a wave, and a palm tree. The text "County of Los Angeles" and "lacounty.gov" is displayed below the icons. The main content area is titled "Email Updates" and contains the following text: "To sign up for email/text notifications or to access your subscriber preferences, please enter your contact information below." There is a "Subscription Type" dropdown menu with "Email" selected. Below that is an "Email Address" input field with a red asterisk indicating it is required. At the bottom of the form are "Submit" and "Cancel" buttons. A small note at the bottom of the form states: "Your contact information is used to deliver requested updates or to access your subscriber preferences." At the very bottom, there are links for "Privacy Policy", "Cookie Statement", and "Help".

2. Commentary on Mayoral Election on Social Media Live Stream

On September 29, 2021 Sheriff Villanueva held his weekly social media livestream, which is broadcast on the official LASD Facebook and Instagram accounts.¹³ In this September 29 livestream, Sheriff Villanueva wore his full LASD uniform and sat in front of a large LASD badge on the wall of his office. Throughout the livestream, individuals, presumably LASD personnel, handed him questions and prepared exhibits.

During this livestream, Sheriff Villanueva told his viewers about a game he came up with to help “educate” the voters. Sheriff Villanueva displayed a large scorecard that listed all five City of Los Angeles mayoral candidates. (See Screenshot B below). He explained: “The game is if you check off three of the five, you’re out, you struck out. And I wouldn’t vote for that person for mayor.”¹⁴ He encouraged viewers to rate each candidate based on their positions on five made-up issues—whether they are part of the “woke elite,” what their homeless strategy is, willingness to “un-handcuff LAPD,” whether they are anti-law enforcement, and what their stance is on defunding law enforcement. At one point, he rhetorically asked how many strikes Mayor Garcetti has, stating, “He went five for five on strikes.”¹⁵ He also stated, “We definitely do not need anybody who’s a career politician.”¹⁶

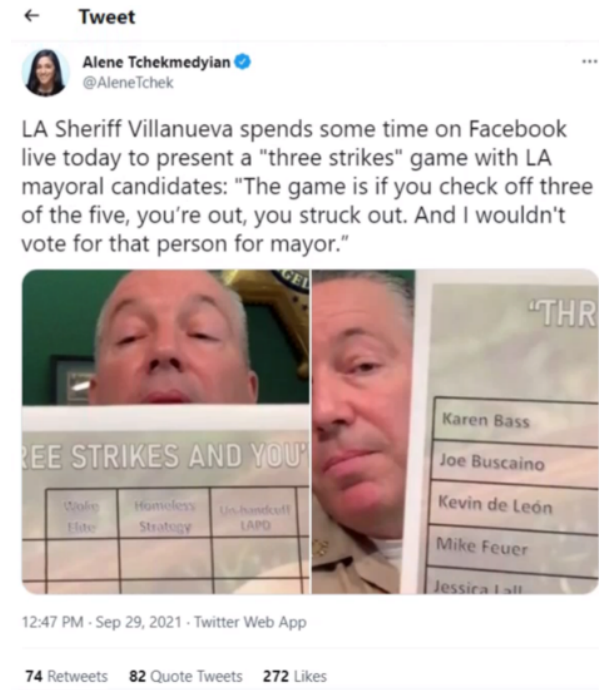
¹³ September 29, 2021 broadcast available at <https://www.facebook.com/LosAngelesCountySheriffsDepartment/videos/151081613895086/>. See 39:07-42:53.

¹⁴ 39:56-40:04.

¹⁵ 41:07-41:15.

¹⁶ 41:56-42:04.

Screenshot B¹⁷



3. Interview on Fox News

On March 4, 2021, Sheriff Villanueva appeared on a Fox News television segment titled “LA County Sheriff Joins Recall Effort Against DA Gascon” in full LASD uniform.¹⁸ In the interview about the effort to recall District Attorney Gascon, Sheriff Villanueva heavily criticized District Attorney Gascon and his policies. Sheriff Villanueva’s statements were inflammatory, unbalanced, and not factual. In particular, he offered a conspiratorial opinion on District Attorney Gascon’s campaign and research funding, alleging:

The person who bankrolled Gascon’s race for DA—in the same time unseating an African American female, the very first one, Jackie Lacy, in office—that same person, George Soros, also bankrolled the “research,” we’ll call it research, that he’s citing. Alliance for Safety and Justice. Very slick; very well-funded, but what they’re producing is garbage.¹⁹

Sheriff Villanueva failed to adequately distinguish his role as a public official from his privately held political views. The segment also included footage of Sheriff Villanueva in plain clothes signing what appears to be the recall petition and speaking at a recall rally.

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/AleneTchek/status/1443301527100157956>.

¹⁸ Segment available at <https://video.foxnews.com/v/6237141776001#sp=show-clips>.

¹⁹ 5:02-5:27.

4. Social Media Post about Los Angeles City Councilmember Bonin

Sheriff Villanueva has criticized Los Angeles City Councilmember Mike Bonin multiple times on social media. Councilmember Bonin is running for reelection in 2022 and there is currently a recall effort against him that has been active since the summer of 2021. On October 21, 2021, a post was shared on the official LASD Twitter²⁰ and Facebook²¹ accounts, and was shared by Sheriff Villanueva on his official Sheriff Twitter²² and Instagram²³ accounts, that stated: “When did you decide to stop trying LA City Councilman Mike Bonin? This is your field office. The seniors would like their center back and the kids would like to use the park.” On the LASD Facebook post, this statement is attributed to “Sheriff Alex Villanueva.”²⁴ The post contains four images, two of which feature Sheriff Villanueva in his LASD uniform (see Screenshots C and D below).²⁵

Screenshot C



²⁰ <https://twitter.com/LASDHQ/status/1451340567774859276>.

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=242084387959685&set=pcb.242084721292985>.

²² <https://twitter.com/LACoSheriff/status/1451340933987897348>.

²³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVT34mcPqM/>.

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=242084387959685&set=pcb.242084721292985>.

²⁵ Id.

Screenshot D



5. Photo with Larry Elder

On August 28, 2021, days before the Gubernatorial recall election, Sheriff Villanueva shared a photo of himself with Larry Elder, who at the time was campaigning for California governor in the recall election, on his official Sheriff Instagram²⁶ and Twitter²⁷ accounts (see Screenshot E below). In the photo, Sheriff Villanueva is wearing an LASD lapel pin.

Screenshot E



²⁶ https://www.instagram.com/p/CTIhmzGBCK2/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/LACoSheriff/status/1431733341594669058>.

6. Demotion of Sheriff Candidate Eli Vera

On August 30, 2021, Sheriff Villanueva demoted LASD chief Eli Vera to commander.²⁸ Vera announced in late April 2021 that he would be running against Sheriff Villanueva in the 2022 Los Angeles County Sheriff election. Vera stated in an interview with the L.A. Times that he believes the demotion was “politically driven.”²⁹ In the L.A. Times interview, Vera also stated that Sheriff Villanueva has utilized the department to intimidate him, including requesting that Vera and others sign a confidentiality agreement and sending two sheriff’s deputies to his home to question his wife about a resolved matter.³⁰

7. Allegation of Retaliation Against Sheriff Candidate Eric Strong

On December 7, 2021, Sidra Sherrod-Strong announced her lawsuit against LASD for retaliation.³¹ Until recently, Sherrod-Strong has been the commander for LASD’s Food Services Unit, but on October 25, 2021, she was notified that she was being involuntarily transferred and under administration investigation,³² Sherrod-Strong’s spouse, Eric Strong, had announced his candidacy for Los Angeles County Sheriff in August 2021, and has been campaigning to become the next sheriff.³³ During their press conference, Sherrod-Strong and Strong claimed the timing of this action by LASD management is “suggestive” and “not accidental.”³⁴

In conclusion, Sheriff Villanueva has an extensive history of intimidating and bashing those he views as political enemies,³⁵ and in the last few months, he has begun to blur the lines of expressing his personal views as a private citizen and using his position as Los Angeles County Sheriff and County resources to do so. We request that the Office of the Attorney General investigate the above-described incidents as well as any other instances of Sheriff Villanueva improperly engaging in campaign activity to ensure that the voters of Los Angeles County are not improperly influenced in the upcoming elections. Please feel free to contact us with any questions.

²⁸ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/21056725-eli-vera-demotion-letter>.

²⁹ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-09-07/villanueva-demotes-sheriffs-candidate-eli-vera>.

³⁰ See more at *id.*

³¹ <https://witnessla.com/lasd-whistleblower-files-lawsuit-for-retaliation-her-husband-candidate-for-la-county-sheriff-says-the-attack-is-personal/>

³² *Id.*

³³ <https://witnessla.com/eric-strong-is-the-newest-entry-to-the-growing-list-of-people-who-hope-to-unseat-la-county-sheriff-alex-villanueva/>

³⁴ <https://witnessla.com/lasd-whistleblower-files-lawsuit-for-retaliation-her-husband-candidate-for-la-county-sheriff-says-the-attack-is-personal/>

³⁵ For example, Sheriff Villanueva allegedly uses LASD’s Civil Rights and Public Integrity Detail to launch lengthy and unfounded investigations against public officials who have criticized him, in an effort to intimidate them. Read more in *L.A. County Sheriff’s Unit Accused of Targeting Political Enemies, Vocal Critics*, Alene Tchekmedyan, Los Angeles Times (Sep. 23, 2021) available at <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-09-23/sheriff-alex-villanueva-secret-police>.

Sincerely,

Check the Sheriff Coalition & Black Lives Matter Los Angeles

Check the Sheriff Coalition consist of: ACLU of Southern California; American Indian Movement – Southern California; Anti-Recidivism Coalition; Bend the Arc Jewish Action – Southern California; Black Alliance for Just Immigration; Black Jewish Justice Alliance; Black Lives Matter – Los Angeles; Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition; California Immigrant Policy Center; Central American Resource Center – Los Angeles; Centro Community Service Organization; Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice; Creating Justice – Los Angeles; Dignity & Power Now; Essie Justice Group; Immigrant Defenders Law Center; Inner City Struggle; Khmer Girls in Action; La Defensa; Me Too Survivors' March International; National Immigration Law Center; National Lawyers Guild – Los Angeles; Occupy ICE – Los Angeles; People's City Council; Reform L.A. Jails; The Row Church; TransLatin@ Coalition; White People 4 Black Lives; Youth Justice Coalition; YNOT Movement.