

## Gay rights protest group alleges harassment

Soulforce Equality Ride sends letter to attorney general, mayor about treatment

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By Elizabeth Crisp

Some members of Soulforce Equality Ride say they were intimidated by Clinton police after a gay rights protest at Mississippi College this week.

The allegation has drawn the attention of the nation's largest gay rights organizations, including the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

Clinton police Lt. Randy Ruffin said the department did nothing wrong and "bent over backward trying to accommodate" the Soulforce Equality Ride on Thursday.

Soulforce, a group visiting Christian colleges throughout the nation to protest inequality, faxed a letter to state Attorney General Jim Hood's office Friday, claiming police officers made the group move three times in 10 minutes as it waited for the riders to meet at the bus.

The group also alleges one officer instructed the protesters to "get out of town" and said the driver would be arrested if they did not leave, according to the letter.

The national coalition has sent a letter to Clinton Mayor Rosemary Aultman and made calls her office, Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Matt Foreman said.

"Something like this can cause long-lasting damage to a city's image," Foreman said. "The behavior of their police brings up the worst stereotypes of the South."

Ruffin denied the allegations made by Soulforce and said the group was told to move once because the bus was blocking traffic.

"The making of untrue and baseless claims of law enforcement maltreatment is a tactic used by Soulforce in an attempt to garner sympathetic support from anyone who will listen," Ruffin said.

Ten members of Soulforce have said they would sign affidavits that the intimidation occurred.

Kyle DeVries, a Soulforce participant from Tallahassee, Fla., said the organization wants an apology from the Police Department.

The group alleges the intimidation happened after five members, including DeVries, were released from jail following arrests for trespassing during the protest.

The group was released after appearing in Clinton Municipal Court on Thursday evening.

DeVries said all five received suspended jail sentences, but that could not be confirmed with court services on Friday.

Ruffin said he was not aware that they had received jail time.