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When does speech become a crime? Experts weigh in after N.J. man is accused of using racial slurs against a neighbor.

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A recent confrontation outside a South Jersey home has highlighted the line between free speech and criminal harassment, as well as the tools residents have to guard against abusive neighbors.

On Friday, a Mount Laurel man was filmed on a Black neighbor's doorstep, repeatedly using racial slurs and saying, "come see me." Police arrested Edward Cagney Mathews at his home Monday after more than 100 protestors gathered outside, some of whom said the 45-year-old had long been threatening others.

"You come home, it should be a safe haven," said Sarah Davis, a neighbor in a nearby apartment. "And we don't have that here."

Legal experts said there were multiple ways residents could report problematic behavior, from asking police to step in as mediators to filing a citizen's complaint at a local courthouse, since state law offers a broad definition of harassment regardless of who owns the property where an incident takes place.

Just using a slur doesn't necessarily violate the statute.

"The context is always really important," said Alexis Karteron, associate professor at Rutgers Law School in Newark. "If someone were just walking down the street and muttering racial slurs, it would be hard to say that constituted a threat."

The "threat" is key, she said.

Someone may have committed a crime if they use "fighting words," which can be defined as language that could lead to violence, Karteron said.

In Mount Laurel, Mathews faces several charges, including harassment.

That's a "disorderly persons offense" in New Jersey, which is low-level. State law says someone is guilty if they say anything "likely to cause annoyance or alarm," including "offensively coarse language." The threat of violence, or even "offensive touching," also counts.

That crime becomes more serious if a victim feels targeted because of who they are, especially along racial, religious or gender lines, among other categories. Mathews has also been charged with bias intimidation, which could lead to prison time.

If a potential threat is not clear-cut, experts still recommended documenting every encounter, whether it's with cell phone video or detailed notes.

Calling local police can also help build a case against an abuser, said Jason Williams, an associate professor of justice studies at Montclair State University.

Reporting bullying can alert cops to brewing conflict and potentially allow police to step in early as arbiters. "When we think about peacekeeping, that should be the quintessential role of local law enforcement," Williams said.

If cops choose not to charge somebody accused of misconduct, residents may still file their own complaints.

Anybody can walk into their local police department or municipal courthouse and ask to make a "citizens complaint," said Frank Morano, a former deputy attorney general who now practices with the firm Argentino Fiore Law & Advocacy.

The one-page citizen complaint form in Woodland Park, for example, mainly asks for a description of the offense committed.

The more detail you can provide, the better, Morano said. "The major caveat is, don't be frivolous."

If a judge agrees a crime may have occurred, the two sides can end up in court and the offender may be fined.

In addition, residents who believe their employers or landlords turned a blind eye to harassment can also file complaints online with the state's Division on Civil Rights.

NJ Advance Media staff writers Avalon Zoppo and Rebecca Everett contributed to this report.