

LEPOCO: “We stand with the Black Lives Matter Movement as they seek racial justice”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing June 6, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the George Floyd killing* 

Barbara Diamond enjoys retirement as Lehigh University Director of Foundation Relations by engaging in various activities and organizations hopefully for the betterment of the community. Her particular interests at the moment are preventing gun violence, local government ethics reform, and Bethlehem Democratic Committee work.

Dear Gadfly,

In 2016, in response of widespread protests related to police killings, **LEPOCO** issued the following statement and call to action. It is notable that the recommended course of action then is much the same as we hear today; there has been little discernible progress over the last four years. We are not likely to see the changes we need and want until we hold political leaders at all levels to account for their inaction. I am heartened by the sustained demand for change expressed through these protests, maybe we are at a turning point. We will get meaningful change if the people in the streets carry their fervor into the voting booth in the next election cycles for national, state, and local offices, and prioritize racial justice and policing with their votes.

LEPOCO Statement on Violence, Policing and the Black Lives Matter Movement

LEPOCO grieves with the rest of the nation following recent shootings that have shattered so many families and communities. As an organization dedicated to building a just and peaceful world through nonviolent action, we feel compelled to speak out about the ongoing and escalating violence that has taken the lives of our fellow citizens, especially African-Americans, as well as members of law enforcement.

We recognize these tragic events to be rooted in a longstanding and well-documented history of racial disparity in the criminal justice system that disproportionately impacts people of color, as recently acknowledged by FBI Director, James B. Comey.* Institutional racism and structural problems such as poverty, a country awash in drugs and guns, plus a host of law enforcement practices, customs and institutions have fueled mass incarceration with the result that people of color, especially African-Americans, are overrepresented in arrests, incarceration, and killings by police. While problems of excessive force are repeatedly documented, accountability by police officers is most often lacking or invisible.

The Black Lives Matter movement has given voice to people's justified anger at a criminal justice system that targets them disproportionately with profoundly adverse effects on individuals, families, communities, and our nation as a whole. We support their nonviolent effort to bring attention to this widespread and long-standing problem. We stand with them as they seek racial justice.

We call upon our local political leaders, police, and fellow citizens to recognize and address the fact that racial bias in policing breeds distrust. We support the policy proposals championed by Campaign Zero (www.joincampaignzero.org) to reduce police violence which include: ending broken windows policing; increasing community oversight and representation; limiting use of force; independently investigating and prosecuting police misconduct; mandating body cameras; improving police training; ending for-profit policing; demilitarizing police departments; and negotiating fair police union contracts.

As an organization committed to demilitarization on a national level, we especially hold that military weapons and tactics should not be making their way into the hands of our police officers or into our communities. When police enter communities as though they are an invading force and not members of that same community, we cannot build a more peaceful world. Just as we've seen in countries abroad, aggression and more weapons do not make our communities safer. These practices create a battle zone where anyone can be considered an enemy, and everyone is in the line of fire.

We recognize that policing is a dangerous business that puts individuals at risk on a daily basis as they accomplish their duty to protect and serve. We urge our local police chiefs to work in partnership with community stakeholders, to review practices and policies that are discriminatory in their effect, and to find ways to redress and prevent discrimination. Working together, we can ensure effective unbiased law enforcement so that our hearts will not be broken by another tragedy like Dallas, Baton Rouge, Minneapolis, Baltimore, and so many others.

We are not helpless in the face of this violence. We must come together to address the problems that contribute to it: ongoing systemic racism; racial bias in policing; economic inequality; militarism; and easy access to highly lethal weapons that threaten the public including the police. LEPOCO will continue to stand with others in the Lehigh Valley to address these problems and work for a more just and peaceful world.

*FBI Director acknowledges "hard truths" about racial bias in policing, Sari Horwitz, *Washington Post*, 2/12/15.

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Barbara

LEPOCO is a Bethlehem treasure. How many cities can boast an organization dedicated to peace?