NAACP Legal Defense Fund Statement on Acquittal of Tulsa Police Officer for Death of Terence Crutcher

Today, a jury acquitted Tulsa Police Officer Betty Jo Shelby of first-degree manslaughter for fatally shooting Terence Crutcher, an unarmed Black man, during a roadside encounter in 2016. NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill issued the following statement in response:

“We are deeply disappointed that yet another police officer has eluded conviction for killing an unarmed African American. Officer Shelby continually altered her account of the incident, apparently changing the details based on the influence of counsel and discoveries by her fellow officers instead of her own recollection. For instance, she mentioned at trial that she smelled an odor of PCP on Mr. Crutcher, a detail she neglected to mention during her initial interview with authorities when she discussed how she thought Mr. Crutcher may have had a mental health issue or was high on an illegal substance. Assistant District Attorney Kevin Grey rightly questioned this revelation, asking why she might have thought he had a mental health issue at the time if she’s now saying she smelled PCP. Indeed, ADA Grey even suggested that the Tulsa Police Department endeavored to shield Officer Shelby from justice, conducting her initial interview days after the shooting and widely disseminating information that would buttress her case. During trial, we also saw the POP in Tulsa engage in an inappropriate social media campaign aimed at influencing the verdict by sullying Mr. Crutcher’s name and attempting to indemnify Officer Shelby. Although this conduct from law enforcement is not new, it is reprehensible. When officers rush to aid a colleague who has acted wrongfully instead of the victim, it further undermines community trust in both the police and in the criminal justice system itself.”

“We eagerly await the findings of the Department of Justice’s (DOJ) investigation, and hope that federal charges will be filed given the egregious misconduct. This case, as well as the fatal shooting of Eric Harris by the Tulsa County Sheriff’s office, raises great concerns about the use of deadly force against unarmed Black men in the city of Tulsa. We call on the DOJ and other agencies to meet their legal obligation to ensure that no federal funding goes to police departments that engage in discriminatory policing.”

“At this time, our thoughts are also with Mr. Crutcher’s family. They’ve endured the agonizing pain of losing a loved one at the hands of police, a pain that far too many Black families have been forced to confront.”

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.