NAACP Legal Defense Fund Statement on Acquittal of St. Anthony Police Officer for Death of Philando Castile

Today, a jury acquitted St. Anthony, Minnesota Police Officer Jeronimo Yanez of second-degree manslaughter and two counts of intentionally discharging a dangerous weapon for fatally shooting Philando Castile, an unarmed Black man, during a roadside encounter in July 2016. NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill issued the following statement in response:

“We are profoundly disappointed by the jury’s verdict, which once again highlights how difficult it is to prosecute an officer for killing a person they were sworn to protect and serve. Officer Yanez joins a long and still growing list of police officers who have killed people of color with impunity. Throughout the proceedings, we saw Mr. Castile and his girlfriend, who weren’t accused of a crime, be demonized while the officer actually on trial was heralded as a great policeman and sympathetic soon-to-be-father. This unjust yet familiar defense simply does not correspond with the video millions throughout the country watched last summer as Officer Yanez took Mr. Castile’s life in front of his girlfriend and her four-year-old daughter. This incident seemed so egregious and avoidable that we hoped that this time, it might be different – that this time, justice might be served. Because if the government can take your life and no one is held responsible, you are a second-class citizen, if not fully dehumanized in the eyes of the law. That is the devastating message this verdict, along with all those similar acquittals before it, sends to communities of color across the nation.

“Prior to the fatal encounter, Mr. Castile reportedly had been pulled over by police in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area at least 49 times. This is unacceptable. We hope that this case and other recent tragedies in Minnesota serve as an impetus to law enforcement throughout the state to reevaluate their policing policies and practices to make sure they are safe, responsible, and in accordance with the Constitution. We also call on the St. Anthony Police Department to conduct an internal investigation of Officer Yanez and impose appropriate discipline, including termination.

“Our thoughts remain with Mr. Castile’s family as they continue to grieve. We remain in awe of their strength during this unimaginably difficult time. Without the courage and fortitude Mr. Castile’s girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, displayed in filming the encounter, we may not have ever known of this injustice.
Though it may seem impossible to some right now, we will continue to fight tirelessly for policing reform and the elimination of racially-biased police practices and policies around the country.”

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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.