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Re: Contract Approval for Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative (PAD)

Dear City Council Members,

On behalf of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF),¹ we write to share with you our strong support for Atlanta's Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative (PAD), and the importance of swiftly approving the multi-year contract that PAD was awarded following a competitive bidding process. Last year, LDF issued a Framework for Public Safety,² which calls for alternative responders to law enforcement for low-level calls so that our system of community safety can keep people safe while respecting their dignity and humanity and allowing all people to thrive. Programs like PAD are essential to achieve a more equitable system of public safety for the people of Atlanta.

¹ LDF is the nation's first and foremost civil rights and racial justice legal organization. Founded in 1940 under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, LDF was launched at a time when the nation's aspirations for equality and due process of law were stifled by widespread state-sponsored racial inequality. From that era to the present, LDF's mission has been transformative—to achieve racial justice, equality, and an inclusive society, using the power of law, narrative, research, and people to defend and advance the full dignity and citizenship of Black people in America. LDF's litigation, policy advocacy, organizing, and public education programs seek to ensure the fundamental rights of all people to quality education, economic opportunity, the right to vote and fully participate in democracy, and the right to a fair and just judicial system. For more than 80 years, LDF has fought to address unconstitutional and racially discriminatory law enforcement conduct, and racial bias throughout the criminal legal system.

² Justice in Public Safety Project, *Framework for Public Safety*, LDF (2023), [Framework for Public Safety - Legal Defense Fund \(naacpldf.org\)](https://www.naacpldf.org/framework-for-public-safety).

PAD provides critical services for Atlanta’s most vulnerable residents—important services that are in jeopardy unless its contract is approved immediately. Through PAD’s care navigation team, in 2022, PAD provided emergency housing to 304 participants, secured placement in residential substance use treatment for 145 participants, and placed 141 participants in bridge housing.³ Thus, it is no exaggeration to state that PAD’s services can improve—and have improved—the life trajectory of many of Atlanta’s most vulnerable residents. PAD teams take the necessary time and care to understand the needs of the people they encounter and connect them with needed services, such as emergency and bridge housing, which is critical to preventing future contact with police. PAD’s services reduce police contact for people who might otherwise face criminalization due to poverty, substance use, or a mental health disability.

PAD is presently underutilized by the City of Atlanta and has the potential to improve the lives of a far greater number of vulnerable Atlanta residents. For example, Atlanta’s recent Jail Population Review Committee found that, in 2022, 3,462 people were jailed in Fulton County for charges that were eligible for diversion through PAD.⁴ Yet, in 2022, PAD reported only 369 diversions and 1,321 responses to requests from community members.⁵

PAD is underutilized in part because it does not receive all eligible calls from the 911 Communications Center. The 911 Communications Center is responsible for identifying and diverting PAD-eligible calls from 911 to 311, from which PAD can be dispatched. Atlanta Police Department (APD) officers also have the discretion to call PAD when they determine a call to which they have responded is PAD-eligible. Yet, neither the 911 Communications Center nor the APD are fully utilizing PAD’s services. City Council, therefore, should urge the APD and 911 Communications Center to develop specific policies that would maximize the diversion of eligible calls to PAD. Diverting more calls to PAD through 311 would not only reduce police contact and the likelihood of criminalization for low-level incidents, but would also substantially lower costs through reduced officer-time on low-level calls.

Funding for the APD regularly constitutes the single largest general expenditure for the City of Atlanta, approximately one-third of its budget.⁶ Between 2010-2020, Atlanta spent more on policing than almost three-fourths of other large police departments across the country.⁷ In Atlanta, as in many cities across the country, low-level calls constitute a substantial portion of 911 calls to which law enforcement officers respond. Armed police officers are called upon to intervene in a wide array of crises, as well as routine, non-emergency events for which they are not equipped to resolve. In a Public Safety Committee meeting in January 2024, Atlanta’s Police Administrator shared that out of 1.3 million 911 calls in 2023, only about 45,000 were actual emergencies.⁸ Non-emergency calls tie up 911 dispatcher time and frequently result in the dispatch of law enforcement officers who are ill-equipped to address the needs of the caller. PAD can only respond to the calls it receives. We thus urge the City Council to encourage the APD and

³ Georgia Criminal Justice Data Landscapes Insights, *Atlanta Policing Alternatives and Diversion Case Study*, University of Georgia Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 7-8, [criminal-justice-case-study.pdf \(uga.edu\)](https://www.cjdl.org/atlanta-police-alternatives-and-diversion-case-study)

⁴ *Fulton County Jail Population Review: Assessing Short- and Long-Term Jail Use Trends*, 32 (Nov. 18, 2022), [JPRC+Review.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.fultoncountyga.gov/~/media/2022/11/18/Fulton-County-Jail-Population-Review-Assessing-Short-and-Long-Term-Jail-Use-Trends).

⁵ PAD Monthly Report (December 2022), [PAD+December+2022+Report.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.padatlanta.org/pad-monthly-report).

⁶ *What Policing Costs, Atlanta, GA*, <https://www.vera.org/publications/what-policing-costs-in-americas-biggest-cities/atlanta-ga>.

⁷ Kendall Glynn, *What are Atlanta’s solutions to police violence?*, Atlanta Civic Circle, (Aug. 24, 2023), <https://atlantaciviccircle.org/2023/08/30/atlanta-police-violence-approach-major-cities/#:~:text=Funding%20the%20APD%20is%20the,%24202%20million%20%E2%80%93%20goes%20to%20salaries>.

⁸ Brittany Ford, Rachel Polansky, *Atlanta 911 calls on the rise, number of non-emergency callers causing delays*, Atlanta New First (Jan. 30 2024), [Atlanta 911 calls on the rise, number of non-emergency callers causing delays \(atlantanewfirst.com\)](https://atlantanewfirst.com/atlanta-911-calls-on-the-rise-number-of-non-emergency-callers-causing-delays)

911 Communications Center to develop policies that maximize the diversion of eligible calls to PAD from across all districts in Atlanta. And we further urge City Council to approve PAD's contract with the City of Atlanta so its crucial services continue to be available for the benefit of both cost savings and reduced criminalization of low-level, poverty-related incidents.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Puneet Cheema, Manager of LDF's Justice in Public Safety Project, at pcheema@naacpldf.org.

Sincerely,

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.

Cc: Mayor Andre P. Dickens