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LDF Clients Testify at Philadelphia City Council Hearing About Police Violence Employed Against Residents of a Predominantly Black Neighborhood

Today, several NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) clients testified before the Philadelphia City Council's Public Safety Committee regarding their experiences with excessive and unwarranted militaristic force from Philadelphia Police Department (PPD) police officers on May 31, 2020. On that day, amid nationwide protests against police abuses against Black people, the PPD repeatedly attacked protestors, residents, and bystanders who had congregated in West Philadelphia's 52nd Street neighborhood. Officers used military-style weapons against these individuals as they either peacefully protested or engaged in daily activities inside or near their homes. Because of the PPD's targeted violence, many people – including children – were injured, and some had to temporarily evacuate their homes because they were filled with tear gas.

LDF, along with co-counsel the Abolitionist Law Center and the law firm of Kairys, Rudovsky, Messing, Feinberg & Lin LLP, filed a lawsuit on July 14, 2020 on behalf of residents in this predominantly Black neighborhood, raising claims that PPD's violent actions on May 31 violated the residents' Fourth Amendment right to be free from excessive force, First Amendment right to peaceably assemble and express their views, and Fourteenth Amendment right to be free from racially discriminatory policing under the Equal Protection Clause.

LDF client Amelia Carter's written testimony vividly describes the harrowing violence many Black West Philadelphia residents endured on May 31:

"Later in the afternoon ... I saw police officers fire tear gas and rubber bullets at people gathered on the 52nd Street corridor, which started a stampede. A tear gas canister flew over my head and landed one foot in front of me as I turned my back to run. As the gas billowed out and hit my face, seizing my lungs and stinging my eyes, I realized I couldn't breathe or see. A street medic helped flush my eyes with water. Even in the midst of fearing for my safety from police use of excessive and indiscriminate force, I was worried about COVID-19 exposure, as I had to remove my now soiled mask and was being coughed on by people in the same condition.

"As the police continued to shoot gas, I tried to run home to escape the scene but ... gas canisters were [also] released on the residential street, thus hitting me with tear gas again.

When I finally reached my home, it was full of tear gas, forcing me to go back outside. The PPD armored vehicles continued moving south on 52nd Street, firing tear gas onto other residential blocks. I witnessed neighbors incapacitated by gas due to bad asthma reactions. It wasn't cops who helped neighbors yelling in the street for assistance. It was other neighbors who were struggling to breathe themselves who came to their aid."

The written testimony of another LDF client, Bedjy Jeanty, also depicts the severity of the police violence employed against West Philadelphia's residents and protesters, and speaks to the damaging effects this violence has on Black communities, including the fear it perpetuates:

"The police officers formed a line against us like they were ready to attack us all. Then a lady whispered in my ear, 'you see this line they are forming against us, they are planning to attack the crowd.' I took the stool that was in the street and stood on it with my right fist up and my head down. I probably stood on the stool in the heat for about seven minutes with my fist in the air talking to a police officer who appeared to be a captain because he had a white collared shirt on. I was asking him to protect us and asked the protesters to take a knee.

"I said the protesters are afraid of what y'all might do. As a Black man in America, Black woman, Black father, Black son, or Black daughter, if you are Black period in America, we are afraid of what y'all police officers might do to us. I stood tall to him and put my right fist back in the air and my head down and all of a sudden I got hit with a blue rubber bullet.

"I began walking towards the officer and got hit with his baton and I didn't notice that the armored truck had pulled up next to me while my head was down. I was pepper sprayed and everyone was running for our lives. Everyone was scared. My shoulder was dislocated and I was having severe chest pain. I am still Black in America and I still fear for my children."

The full written testimonies of all LDF clients who participated in the hearing are below:

Ryan Bing
Amelia Carter
Sergio Cea
Bedjy Jeanty
Emily Neil
Judith Palmer

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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. LDF 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.