

An Open Letter: Memphis Nonprofits Demand Action

We have come together as black leaders in the nonprofit space to amplify the cries and demands heard in our streets and around the country. Joined by our non-black colleagues in leadership, we demand more of our city's leadership. We see the direct impact of systemic racism and oppression daily. The community members our organizations partner with and serve are the direct targets of police brutality, over-policing, poverty wages, subpar education, and systemic racism. As the protests in Memphis have taken place, we stand in solidarity with the organizers and activists leading the charge.

For far too long, nonprofits have been a stop gap solution to systemic issues. Our city is set up for many of our residents to be oppressed. National comparisons tell the tale of high poverty rates, health inequities, broad racial wealth gaps, and a dearth of opportunities for young adults, to name a few. We call for a new day and new way of doing business in our city. Expecting nonprofits and public goodwill to solve these challenges is not enough. Relying on nonprofits to fill the gap and fix issues that are hundreds of years in the making is not enough. We believe we can have a city where everyone thrives, but it will take bold action to get there.

This fight has been building for a long time. The deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and so many others have brought us to today. These are not isolated incidents - we witness daily police violence and over-policing in our very own city, along with the unresolved investigations from local police shootings such as Darrius Stewart and Martavious Banks. Most recently, the law enforcement response to peaceful protests has been egregious. A fellow nonprofit Executive Director, Victoria Jones, was targeted and attacked with zero accountability for those actions by police. We call on Memphis leaders to honor the following demands:

1. Release all of the peaceful protesters that were arrested in any and all marches and drop all charges; Investigate law enforcement brutality and misconduct during recent protests with public reporting of findings and a commitment to hold officers accountable for any wrongdoing
2. Reallocate funding from the police department to fund alternatives rooted in community health and crisis response
3. Ban chokeholds and strangleholds by Memphis Police Officers and Sheriff's Deputies
4. Require de-escalation as a first response by Memphis Police Officers and Sheriff's Deputies
5. Develop a Duty To Intervene policy that requires officers to intervene when witnessing another officer using excessive force for the Memphis Police Department and the Sheriff's Office
6. Require reporting by officers and deputies any time they point a firearm at a citizen

7. Give the Civilian Law Enforcement Review Board (CLERB) the power it needs to investigate and ensure accountability for police conduct and provide clear avenues for CLERB's input on MPD training, policies, and procedures
8. Include grassroots black and brown leaders and activists on the search and selection committee for the next MPD Chief

The systemic issues that shape people's lives go beyond police brutality and over-policing. Our black and brown residents face some of the highest inequality and poverty in the country. From education to wages, we have constructed and perpetuated a system that keeps our residents in poverty. We call on leadership in all sectors - government, nonprofits, and corporations - to adopt an agenda that addresses these issues. It will require doing business differently and centering the lives, dreams, and concerns of all of our residents. In order to get to a new vision for Memphis and Shelby County, we demand the following:

1. Combat poverty by tracking companies paying a living wage and having corporations sign on to a living wage pledge and commitment to give temporary employees health insurance and benefits
2. Renew investment in K-12 education in the City of Memphis budget, including support for early literacy, high school success, trauma-responsive supports, and increased access to tech, art and music education
3. End money bail and stop predatory, ballooning penalties for traffic tickets, court costs, and other fines
4. Enact a citizen participatory budgeting process at the city and county level beginning with FY22 budgets in partnership with Memphis City Council and County Commission that prioritizes neighborhood-level investments
5. Release a clear plan for funding a more effective MATA transit system by August 2020, overseen by a community-appointed team

Words are not enough. Commitments to meet or form a task force are not enough. Good intentions are meaningless when year after year we continue to have the same dismal outcomes. We believe deeply that the leadership in our city wants a city where all residents are treated with dignity and humanity and are provided opportunities to become thriving citizens. For us to get there, we ask that the leaders in government and business respond to these demands with clear commitments to ACTIONS. What will your legacy be? We represent thousands of your constituents and they are demanding more. Four years ago, Memphians marched on the Hernando DeSoto Bridge and there were calls for change. Four years later, little has changed. We ask that we not let more lives be lost to violence, to poverty, and to systemic racism. It is our hope that in four years, rather than lamenting the same challenges, we are celebrating the results of these changes.

For questions or media inquiries, please reach out
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