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DEAR PRESIDENT OBAMA: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER FERGUSON?

Celebrities, politicians, business, faith, and nonprofit leaders insist the President must act immediately to stop police violence

August 25, 2014, *New York, NY*: In an open letter, leaders from academia, business, the arts, labor, faith communities, and other local and national leaders are urging President Obama and the U.S. Department of Justice to take immediate action to end the militarization of police forces and adopt community centered strategies in communities of color.

The letter was posted today on WashingtonPost.com

Citing the killing of Michael Brown by a Ferguson, Missouri police officer as the latest in a growing list of such murders, the letter urges the Administration to take prompt action to end the militarization of police departments and bring more accountability to police hiring, promotions, training, oversight, and community engagement. Such actions are essential to achieving equitable policing in communities all across the country, particularly in low-income communities where people of color live.

The letter signing was organized by Maya Rockey Moore, president and CEO of the Center for Global Policy Solutions and Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and CEO of PolicyLink. "Police departments are funded by the public and must be accountable to the public," says Blackwell. "Respect and transparency," she continued, "are essential for justice to prevail."

Rockey Moore notes that, "Michael Brown is the latest in a long list of black men and boys who have died under similar circumstances," adding that it's long past time to address "the systemic racial bias that impairs the perception, judgment, and behavior that is prevalent among too many in police departments and criminal justice institutions."

Congressman Elijah E. Cummings (D-MD) signed the letter because "Ferguson is a reminder that we have yet to address the significant challenges faced by black men and boys. We as a country have to turn this moment into a movement so that they have real opportunities to survive and thrive."

Russell Simmons, CEO, RUSH Communications, observes that "lack of empathy from authorities creates pessimism that engulfs a community and turns 'protect and serve' into something more similar to 'search and destroy,' resulting in outcomes like the death of Mike Brown. To evolve to a better place in America, we must demand that police departments make drastic changes to the way they approach our community. In Mike Brown's memory, let us fix this problem now."

"Michael Brown's death was a true tragedy," says Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA), "and my heart goes out to his family, friends, and community. Sadly, he has become yet another victim of the senseless murder of young African American men, like Oscar Grant and Eric Garner. In this letter, we call on President Obama to take real action and mandate better training and accountability for U.S. police forces while working to demilitarize our public safety agencies, which the President has already begun to review. This review is to be applauded."

Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein pointed to the Torah, which "commands us," she says, "to protect those who are vulnerable in our society." She quotes Exodus 22:20, -- 'You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt—and says that "although our rights and our safety are not endangered in present day America, Jewish tradition teaches that Jews must remember when we, too, were vulnerable to the whims of those in power."

The disproportionate and disparate injustices experienced by communities of color across our nation have become all too common," says Mary Kay Henry, President of SEIU. "Together we can fuel action for change and justice. This is why we are joining the call asking President Obama to demilitarize local law enforcement and work to renew trust and accountability for all communities across the country."

The diversity of positive responses to the letter reflects the strong feeling that the widespread use of disproportionate force must be addressed, and quickly.

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