

Members of the Mentor City Council, City Manager, and Department Directors,

Today, we write to you as America mourns the loss of Black lives at the hands of police brutality and white supremacy. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others before them have been taken away too soon. We stand in solidarity with the communities of these individuals that are beginning the long journey of healing and recovery, and we are reminded that similar violence plagues our Ohio communities as well. Let us never forget 12 year-old Tamir Rice, who was killed by Cleveland Police for holding a toy gun in 2014¹ or Desmond Franklin, a father of four who was killed by an off-duty police officer in April of this year². Black trans women are even more likely to be murdered than Black men and consequently have a shockingly-low life expectancy of only 30-35 years³. Just this past week, Riah Milton, a transgender Black woman living in Liberty Township, Ohio, was murdered, one of at least 13 gender-nonconforming individuals to be killed this year⁴. The senseless killing of Black people is pervasive in our country and our state, and it must be stopped. Black lives matter, and our country must reflect this ideal not just in word, but in practice.

Since Mentor's population is 96.1% white⁵, it may seem as if the issues surrounding racial injustice do not affect our community, but we will argue that our lack of diversity necessitates even *more* discussion around this issue. We must ask ourselves - why do we not have many Black community members? What are we doing to ensure that our white children learn about race and white privilege while simultaneously centering BIPOC voices? What measures are we taking to make our few Black community members and Black visitors to our city feel safe and welcomed? Are our city resources best allocated to address community needs and confront a racially discriminate and oppressive history? Are our police officers being trained in implicit racial bias and de-escalation to make sure our minority populations are not overpoliced? These are conversations that should have been happening in our community from its founding, and it's unfortunate that it has taken the tragic loss of countless Black lives to spark this discussion. However, we must start somewhere, and it is better to have these conversations now than to never have them at all. As former Mentor resident and President of the United States James A. Garfield once said, "Things don't turn up in this world until somebody turns them up."

There are steps that we can take right now to ensure that our local institutions and facilities are suited to combating racism and promoting the equity of all citizens. In brief, we ask you to do the following: **speak out, reallocate, educate, and represent**. Overall, the most pressing demand is to reallocate funds from the police department to more specific community initiatives, such as rehabilitation and mental health services, a community center on race and equity, and affordable and competent housing.

Speak out

Silence is violence. We must speak out against the murder of Black individuals lest we be complicit in these very actions. Many police departments around the country have already condemned Derek Chauvin, Thomas Lane, J.A. Kueng and Tou Thao of the Minneapolis Police Department to condemn their actions and have announced actions they are taking to ensure that this type of behavior is not tolerated in their departments⁶. Notably, the Mentor Police Department has been silent on this issue on all social media and other official platforms. MPD, we demand that you speak out and condemn these officers for murdering George Floyd and state what specific actions you are taking to ensure that this does not happen in Mentor. In light of the murder of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, we also demand that you speak out

against the officers' lack of adherence to the knock-and-announce principle, which was codified by the United States Supreme Court decision of *Wilson v. Arkansas* in 1995⁷. We urge you to publicly announce your ongoing adherence to O.R.C. 2935.12, which implemented reaffirms the knock-and-announce principle in Ohio specifically⁸, and we also suggest that this principle be codified in the Codified Ordinances of Mentor to ensure it is implemented on a local level.

Reallocate

We were shocked to discover that the City of Mentor spent \$17,791,171 on police in 2018⁹. For context, this is 22.3% of the city's total annual expenses, and it averages to \$48,742.93 per day - more than a dollar for each citizen of our city every day of the year. Out of 21,837 calls for service in 2018, only 1,584 (or 7.25%) resulted in arrests¹⁰. We must ask ourselves: for what reasons do our citizens call the police? Since only 7.25% of calls result in arrests, it is clear that the majority of the needs of our citizens that result in police calls can actually be resolved without an armed officer responding to the call. Because of this, we urge the City Council and the Finance Department to consider reallocating some of the funds for police to other parts of our budget that could directly address the underlying needs of our citizens. By refocusing these funds on the areas of concern in our community, we will prevent crime from happening in the first place and thus lower the need for police, creating a positive feedback loop.

When we look at the needs of our citizens, two main issues stand out to us: housing and drug addiction. Approximately 12% of citizens in Lake County experience at least one of the four main severe housing problems: overcrowding, high housing costs, lack of kitchen facilities, or lack of plumbing facilities¹¹. We should redirect funding from the police to create affordable housing for our community members who are struggling to get by. Providing people with roofs over their heads will relieve a burden from citizens that might have otherwise led them to engage in unlawful acts.

Similar to the housing crisis, it is no secret that Ohio is one of the worst-hit states in the opioid epidemic. Ohio has the fifth highest drug overdose death rate of any state with a stunning 38 deaths per 100,000 population¹². Lake County's rate is even higher at 40 deaths per 100,000 population¹². Simply put, we are in a crisis. We urge the City Council and Finance Department to reallocate funding from the police to establish more rehabilitation and addiction services within Mentor to avoid future loss of life in our vulnerable populations. Since drug use is criminalized in Ohio, this will also alleviate the need for policing in our community, again creating a self-perpetuating cycle that will reprioritize our community's needs.

In addition, we call upon MPD to release more information about the budget and training of its police force. We urge the department to implement trainings in implicit bias and de-escalation. We also demand that MPD implement the #8cantwait principles for police reform: ban chokeholds and strangleholds, require de-escalation, require warning before shooting, require exhaustion of all alternatives before shooting, duty to intervene, ban shooting at moving vehicles, require use of force continuum, and require comprehensive reporting¹³. We also urge the department to equip officers with body worn cameras and dashcams that are *always* activated while on shift, with accountability measures in play so an officer who violates this policy is held responsible.

Additionally, we ask the city council to address the direct connection between health care and criminal justice. Both systems are very wealth-dependent when it comes to quality of services and outcomes, which creates a structural inequality that we need to confront. Many people with serious health problems and disabilities go untreated until those medical issues manifest into other problems. Many people would avoid engagement with the criminal justice system if they could afford to treat mental health disabilities, drug dependency, trauma disorders, or health problems triggered by childhood adversity. Our health care and criminal justice systems rely on many actors with enormous discretion, which frequently means that people of color or other disfavored people receive inadequate attention or care¹⁴. We urge the city to bring more transparency to both the health care and criminal justice systems, and to reallocate funds from the police department to mental and physical health services.

Educate

It is vital that our community be informed on the issues of racial justice so that we can not only be aware of mechanisms of dismantling systemic racism, but so that we can implement these approaches in our daily lives. We are aware that the Mentor Exempted Village School District is independent of the city government, but we urge you to work in conjunction with the School Board to review the curriculum to ensure that topics of white supremacy, racial justice, history of civil rights movements, slavery, Jim Crow segregation, racial terror and inequality, presumptions of guilt, and the world's largest prison system etc. are thoroughly covered in the curriculum as much as possible within the Common Core standards and the Ohio Board of Education guidelines. In addition, it is important that the texts students are exposed to are written by authors that represent the diversity of our nation, so we must also ensure that there is ample representation of BIPOC authors in the curriculum of our schools.

In addition, we urge the City Council to consider creating a community center that will be dedicated to learning about race and equity. The community center could involve narrative artwork and interactive media that immerse visitors in an investigation of America's and Ohio's history of racial injustice and its legacy¹⁵. The community center could have a library that includes works from BIPOC thinkers and authors, and we could have a speaker series in which we invite BIPOC speakers to engage with our community and ideate ways we can make our city more inclusive. This could be implemented as an independent facility or as part of the Mentor Public Library. We encourage you to partner with MPL to ensure that our current collections include adequate representation of BIPOC authors and viewpoints.

Represent

Though POC represent a small fraction of our population, it is crucial that these voices be represented in our city government. We suggest that the City Council review efforts to recruit diverse candidates to city positions and implement all available strategies to ensure representation in our government. These individuals are often the most marginalized in our country, and their voices are subject to be lost if they are not given opportunities to speak out and bring diverse perspectives to important conversations. Please take all efforts you can to ensure that this change is made in future recruitment cycles.

We thank you in advance for your consideration of these suggestions. We realize that many of these changes represent avenues of change that our city likely has never considered before. It is unlikely that all of these changes will become a reality in the immediate future, but we hope that this letter opens your

eyes to ways that our city can work towards achieving racial justice and set an example for other communities in our area.

We would like a reply to this letter and a statement on how the city plans to address the above suggestions. Please contact us via email, and we will be happy to stay in contact with you to provide input on the city's actions.

Sincerely,

Logan Leak, loganleak1@gmail.com

Marsita Ferguson, marsitaferguson@icloud.com

Bethany Steffancin, bsteffancin@gmail.com

Robbie Seaton-Todd, robbiseatontodd@aol.com

Sources

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/us/boy-12-dies-after-being-shot-by-cleveland-police-officer.html>
2. <https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2020/05/attorneys-man-killed-by-off-duty-cleveland-cop-never-threatened-officer-or-flashed-gun.html>
3. <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/ViolenceLGBTIPersons.pdf>
4. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/black-trans-lives-matter-new-calls-after-two-murders-dominique-fells-riah-milton/>
5. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?g=0600000US3908549056&hidePreview=true&tid=ACSDP5Y2018.DP05&table=DP05&vintage=2018>
6. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/05/29/george-floyd-police-speak-out-against-minneapolis-custody-death/5281946002/>
7. <https://www.courtlistener.com/opinion/2410364/wilson-v-state/>
8. <https://supremecourt.ohio.gov/rod/docs/pdf/0/2017/2017-ohio-8114.pdf>
9. <https://cityofmentor.com/wp-content/uploads/CAFR-2018.pdf>
10. <https://cityofmentor.com/wp-content/uploads/Mentor-Police-Department-2019-Annual-Report.pdf>
11. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/ohio/2020/measure/factors/136/map>
12. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/ohio/2020/measure/factors/138/data>
13. <https://8cantwait.org/>
14. <http://www.ihl.org/communities/blogs/presuming-innocence-bryan-stevenson-on-justice-and-health-care>
15. <https://eji.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/>