June 3, 2020

Councilmember Amanda Dewey Statement

I, like so many, was horrified and heartbroken to witness the senseless murder of George Floyd. However, this killing was only one part of a long-standing pattern seen across the country.

We can always do better. In Berwyn Heights, I've been impressed by and proud of our Police Chief's commitment to accountability and compassion. I've witnessed our officers facing difficult circumstances and cultivating relationships and trust in our community. But we also know that instances of police brutality are not only rooted in conscious and unconscious racism and bad individual behavior but in structures that have systematically marginalized, disadvantaged, and targeted Black Americans. Black Americans, including Black residents of Berwyn Heights, have centuries of reasons not to trust law enforcement and to fear for their lives, regardless of the track record of an individual agency. Fundamentally, we need to consider how we can build and maintain trust. We need to think beyond the character of our officers, which of course is critically important, and also make sure to consider policies and systems that ensure accountability and equity.

The law enforcement sector carries tremendous responsibility alongside its power in the lives of our families, friends, and neighbors. If we see patterns in other employment sectors that take innocent lives (medicine, transportation), we consider what parts of the system allowed for such poor outcomes and consider changes that may be necessary in our own area. That is what we are all called to do to address problematic patterns related to policing. In the words of Dr. Rashawn Ray, bad apples come from rotten trees. Solutions focused on dealing with bad apples are important (training, etc.), but we also need to do everything in our power to cultivate a healthy tree from the ground up in Berwyn Heights and in the United States.

Progress on this front will require conversations with community members and being open to learning. I'm committed to finding ways to do better in the coming months and years, because there's no place that doesn't need to reflect and pursue initiatives that move us toward equity, justice, and peace for all.

June 3, 2020

Mayor Pro Tem Jason Papanikolas Statement

In 1859, Charles Dickens wrote "A Tale of Two Cities" and even though he was speaking of the horrors of the French Revolution, its famous opening passage could have been ripped from the headlines over the past week and a half.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

In many ways, 21st century America should be the best and wisest of ages, full of lightness and hope for all Americans. And yet, the murder of George Floyd reminds us that the promise of America is not yet fulfilled. Some of our brothers and sisters are living in darkness and despair, surrounded by uncertainty. I watched what happened in Minneapolis with disgust and anger. There is simply no excuse for any man to die over $20. It's ridiculous. It's disgusting. It's a daily experience for many in our society.

In the past week, we have all watched as George Floyd had the life choked out of him by a law enforcement officer whose job it is to protect that life. Yes. That was his duty. Indeed, life is the duty of all law enforcement officers. Yet, in many police departments all over the country - officers act in utter disregard for human life … and all too often face no consequences. It is not simply the murder of George Floyd or countless other men and women (not all of them African-American or Hispanic either), but the casual brutality of the no-knock warrant, the militarization of police departments and the accompanying isolation from the community that comes with it.

Let's make no mistake - there is no culture of accountability in many police departments either. There certainly isn't in the Minneapolis PD. That is evident by the cavalier and nonchalant attitude of the police officers captured in the videos. These individuals have no problem being videotaped doing things that are illegal, immoral, and - in the case of Floyd - depraved. People who do not fear retribution act like this. Indeed, the officers involved had a minimum of two dozen misconduct and excessive force complaints, many of them serious. Based on the information available to the press, George Floyd may not even have been the first person Derek Chauvin murdered.

So, yes, there is no accountability in the Minneapolis Police and that falls on every officer and public official from the Mayor and District Attorney to the newest beat cop. Every police officer in America must bear that burden - not because all police officers are corrupt, but because the vast majority are good - the very people you want compassionately and respectfully enforcing the law. No. Every officer in America bears the burden of the Minneapolis Police Department's lack of accountability because (yet again) it underscores the racial cost of unaccountability. That any African-American, Hispanic, Latino, or any other person of non-Caucasian origin should have more reason to fear a cop than I do more than 50 years after the Civil Rights movement is criminal!

And let's be equally clear. As much as we'd like to blame someone, we can't. We can't blame the President or Republicans or Democrats in Congress or even a small minority of disaffected white people. Our failure to hold those we entrust with power accountable lies with all of us, with you and me. Any time we disrespect another person because of their looks or their sex or who they choose to love we are disrespecting ourselves. We must finally at long last learn to judge people by who they are, not by who they hang with or what they look like.

Maybe if more people felt this way we'd be better off.

A three-month quarantine caused by a pandemic tests a society in countless ways … and we have failed in many ways. Our communities are broken - by violence, by poverty, by excess … and, yes,

even by wealth. These things disconnect us from society; they isolate us and make us turn inward. We must fight against this tendency. It's the only way to ensure accountability in America.

Of course, we can't talk about the bad without mentioning the good. Over the past week, we have also witnessed police officers from many departments and agencies all over the country march with protestors, kneel with protestors, and join with protestors in condemning this outrage. The good really do far outnumber the bad.

We have also watched protestors throw themselves between out-of-town anarchists, bent on destruction, and the police. In Wichita, members of Black Lives Matter sat down to a meal with the Chief of Police and other officers to find common ground.

What did the protestors find? Well, they discovered that these officers were just as sickened as they were by the murder of George Floyd. They discovered that these officers were equally concerned about the neighborhoods they worked in. The officers had ideas about poverty and race and inequality that were similar to their own.

In our own little corner of the world, it can be easy to lose sight of the progress that still needs to be made. Our own police force is well known within the community. It is diverse, experienced, and well-led and trained. They take accountability for themselves and their actions. It is hard to imagine one of our own officers disgracing themselves and their uniforms as Derek Chauvin did. Their commitment to the community is measured in their devotion to duty. During this pandemic, our officers haven't been out harassing young minority youths for playing soccer or walking down the street; they have been checking on our seniors and our vulnerable population. They have been helping keep our residents in high spirits by enthusiastically embracing birthday parades and often have made purchases for some of our residents who couldn't leave home.

I would like to call out two members of our police force who are going above and beyond the call of duty to make our town more inclusive and to make it more difficult for hatred to take root. Officer Rufino and Police Clerk Muralles lead our Town's outreach efforts to our Spanish-speaking population. The more that our Town and its staff can facilitate inclusion and a sense of belonging, the better off we all are.

I will conclude this statement by showing what makes our Town great; why we are not (and hopefully never could become) Minneapolis. On Friday, my wife Tiffany picked up dinner at Chipotle for the family. Outside the restaurant stood a Hispanic man asking folks for something to eat. He only spoke broken English, worked in the restaurant industry, has been unemployed since March, and hadn't eaten since Wednesday so his children were fed. He had stood outside Chipotle begging for food for two hours before my wife saw him. How do I know? Because Tiffany had a conversation with him as she bought this man dinner. When I shared this story on Facebook, several Berwyn Heights residents not only congratulated her (she didn't do it for applause, though it is nice to be acknowledged for doing good), but went one step further and asked if there was anything more we could do to help.

That's what being a good neighbor and a good citizen looks like! We need more people like Tiffany Papanikolas, Officer Christiane Ruffino, Clerk Mercy Muralles, and like the neighbors that I have spoken with in the past week. The world has plenty of Derek Chauvins, Tuo Thaos, and people like the McMichaels. I ask every resident of Berwyn Heights, I ask every police officer, public works maintenance worker, every code officer, each and every one of us. I ask that we get up each morning and commit to respecting each and every human being we meet. If you fall short, expect me to call you out. If I fall short, I expect you to call me out. Only through accountability for our own actions and the actions of our community will we improve.

June 4, 2020

Councilmember Ethan Sweep Statement

The murder of George Floyd was a senseless act of police brutality at the hands of those who were supposed to protect and serve him. George Floyd, an unarmed black man, was handcuffed and pinned to the ground by Minneapolis police officers who were responding to a call about someone paying with a fake $20-bill. George Floyd was murdered at the hands of Officer Derek Chauvin as his brothers in blue stood by his side while he completed their act of vigilante justice. George Floyd had his life stolen from him as he spent 8 minutes and 46 seconds being suffocated by a knee crushing his neck. George Floyd begged for his life to be spared. George Floyd yelled out, "I can't breathe." George Floyd cried out in anguish for his deceased mother, but all of these efforts were unsuccessful. George Floyd slowly lost consciousness and was forced to succumb to death at the hands of the police.

George Floyd's death is not an isolated incident. His name is yet another on an innumerable list that pre-dates our country's origin. The list that George Floyd belongs to starts in 1619, as a ship destined for Virginia brought the first order of slaves to the New World. These slaves were people stolen from their land and brought to a land that was being violently stolen from its indigenous people, which is another list in and of itself. The protests that have erupted across this country are born from a place of extreme grief and anguish. This intense outpouring of pain has plunged our country into a deep divide, and in the absence of light we feel lost. Surrounding us is the foundation this country was built on. The walls are soaked in the blood of the enslaved and the tears of the indigenous people. You and your family's lineage may not be responsible for these stains, but there is no denying the atrocious acts of violence the United States Government has committed against people of color, indigenous people, and other minority groups throughout its short history. The insufferable pain and terror caused by these acts of violence radiates from the walls around us. We feel scared and that's ok, a lot of us are scared right now; however, we must not cower and give in to fear. We must stand up and feel the pain that surrounds us, because only when we acknowledge this pain and suffering can we begin the healing process. To quote Minneapolis City Council Vice President Andrea Jenkins, on her call to declare racism a public health emergency, "if you don't call cancer what it is, you can never cure that disease."

Our country's healing process will require us to have difficult conversations about racism and its systemic presence in the United States. It will require us to be vulnerable with one another as we educate ourselves and others on the many race issues and implicit biases that exist in our society. This vulnerability is inherently uncomfortable, and it's easy to feel attacked and scared in this state, but we must recognize the deficiencies in ourselves and listen to the experiences of others as we all climb towards a more equitable future. We must not forget George Floyd and the countless others that came before him. We must honor their memory and spirit by creating a more just society that is built on accountability and equal justice for all.

Right now, we must cling to two of the most fundamental rights we have in this country, the freedom to protest and the freedom of the press, to demand change. These rights are currently under attack as demonstrated by the barbaric attacks on peaceful protestors and the unlawful arrests of reporters on the front lines. These rights must be protected at all costs. Their survival is necessary to our own and without it our democracy descends into authoritarianism. It is on all of us to rise up, speak out, and stand in solidarity. Black Lives Matter.

June 4, 2020

Councilmember Jeffrey Osmond Statement

Wrong is wrong. Many have said much. I condemn violence, hatred, racism, cruelty, and law breaking. I abhor the dehumanizing of fellow humans. It must stop. It is illegal. Fear not the fearmongers. Unite in commitment to uphold the Constitution. We must all do our best to live to continuously create and work vigilantly to maintain a society with equal opportunity for all, so we may receive the gifts every soul has to offer for the betterment of us all as a whole, one nation under God, indivisible, so truth and justice will fully become the only "American Way", so we may live peaceably in harmony with our neighbors, find happiness, enjoy prosperity.

We must reclaim the vigor and habits to fully use the power of representative democracy, to participate in regulating our government to protect our freedoms. Read, learn, find the facts, vote, vote again, and keep voting until representatives truthfully serve to uphold the core values of human rights enshrined in our nation's Constitution.