



Justice Committee

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Testimony

**New York City Council Finance Hearing
May 21, 2020**

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My name is London Arnold. I am a resident of Bushwick and a representative of the Justice Committee (JC), a grassroots organization dedicated to ending police violence in New York City. The Justice Committee has an almost 40-year history of supporting families who have lost loved ones to the police and organizing with them for police accountability and reform, conducting community education to give New Yorkers tools to exercise their rights and respond to abusive policing, and organizing to strengthen the health and safety of low-income communities of color in NYC.

I am testifying today on behalf of the Justice Committee to call on the New York City Council to take a courageous approach to New York City's 2021 budget. We need a budget that truly prioritizes what our communities need for a just recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and to thrive beyond it. This means reversing the trend of the de Blasio administration and prior administrations of prioritizing policing and criminalization over our communities. NYC has historically spent more on the NYPD and Corrections than the Departments of Health, Housing Preservation and Development, Youth and Community Development, Homeless Services and Workforce Investment combined.

Nothing makes the need for a 180-degree shift in how our city uses resources more than the current public health and financial crisis we're facing. I don't think I need to tell you that the same communities that are suffering the most because of the coronavirus pandemic are also the ones that have historically been targeted for discriminatory, abusive policing and the ones bearing the brunt of the NYPD's aggressive social distancing enforcement practices now.

The heart of the Justice Committee's work is organizing and supporting families who have lost loved ones to the police. We look to the families for leadership as those most affected by the NYPD's abusive, discriminatory practices, who therefore know what changes are needed. No one knows better than these families the devastating impact of the City's overinvestment in policing and underinvestment in low-income communities of color.

Earlier this week, family members of eleven New Yorkers who were killed by the NYPD over the last two and a half decades held a virtual press conference to call for:

- An NYPD hiring freeze
- Cancellation of the new cadet class
- The removal of the NYPD from mental health response and other social service roles including homeless services, School Safety, and its "youth initiative" and the defunding of the NYPD for this work
- The swift removal of officers who kill and brutalize and the defunding of the NYPD for their salaries.

The Justice Committee stands with these families and uplifts these demands before you today. These cuts will save the City hundreds of millions of dollars, if not more, which can then be devoted to the infrastructure, services and programs our communities need.

The Need to Remove NYPD from Mental Health Response and Other Social Service Roles

On Sept. 25, 2012, one of our members, Hawa Bah, mother of Mohamed Bah, called 911 for an ambulance for her son who was suffering from physical and mental health issues. NYPD Emergency

Services Unit officers with heavy equipment and weaponry arrived before the EMTs. Despite Mrs. Bah pleading with them not to, they forced their way into Mohamed's apartment and shot and killed him. Mohamed's death was completely avoidable and is a clear example of why the NYPD should not be the first responders to those in emotional distress.

The families of Saheed Vassell and Kawaski Trawick, who JC also works with, also needlessly lost loved ones to the NYPD. Saheed and Kawaski both struggled with mental health issues and needed social care and support rather than criminalization. The officers involved in [Kawaski's death had undergone Crisis Intervention Training](#) and yet, Kawaski was still gunned down in his own home, where he was not a threat to anyone. Mohamed, Saheed and Kawaski are just a few names in a very long list of New Yorkers who needed mental healthcare and got NYPD aggression instead.

The NYPD spends millions of dollars on its involvement in mental health response, from Crisis Intervention Training, to its new co-response team experiment, to the countless hours officers spend responding to calls involving those in emotional distress. At the same time, our communities lack culturally competent, community-based preventative and post-crisis care services.

As a [2019 DOH study](#) proves, increased contact with police has detrimental effects on mental health. In many cases, merely the presence of police officers can increase fear and anxiety in someone who is already suffering a mental health crisis. It is counterproductive, illogical, costly and dangerous for the NYPD to continue to play a role in mental health response. We need a mental health crisis response system that is not linked to the criminal legal system. We also need to revamp our approach to mental healthcare so that those in need receive the treatment and support that will reduce the likelihood of them becoming severely distressed and enable them to heal.

Removing the NYPD from mental health response will enable the City to devote funding to the kinds of services that will actually support the mental health of our communities.

Poverty, lack of access to affordable housing, employment, services and education, criminalization, and detention and deportation are all stressors that naturally contribute to mental illness. The United Nations has recently highlighted a growing mental health emergency resulting from the pandemic, of which our city is the epicenter. Now more than ever, we need to attend to the wellbeing of our communities by divesting from policing and criminalization and investing in programs that address the root causes of inequity.

Similarly, we join our youth, education and homeless organizational allies in calling for the NYPD to be removed from all social services areas, including mental health response, schools, the NYPD's new "youth initiative", and homeless services. When police play these roles, it only leads to more criminalization of Black and brown New Yorkers, often those who are most vulnerable. Removing them and defunding the NYPD for these areas of work will free up vital resources that can be used to strengthen crucial public infrastructure and programs.

The Cost of Abusive Policing

The NYPD's budget is bloated by its shielding and rewarding of police misconduct and abuse. The City consistently pays out millions of dollars to keep officers who kill and brutalize New Yorkers on the NYPD payroll.

For example, NYPD Officer Wayne Isaacs, who murdered Delrawn Small in cold blood on July 4, 2016, made close to \$250,000 in the three years after shooting Delrawn and leaving him to bleed out in the street. Part of that time he was sitting through his own murder trial. Between 2018 and 2019, his salary jumped over \$30k. Based on the limited information we have access to, Isaacs also cost taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars in civil suit payouts prior to killing Delrawn.

Similarly, the NYPD paid salaries to former officers [Daniel Pantaleo](#) and Richard Haste, who killed Eric Garner and Ramarley Graham, for a half a decade while their mothers fought tirelessly for them to be fired. Each of them received tens of thousands of dollars in pay increases as well. Like Isaacs, we know Pantaleo has already cost the City tens of thousands in civil suit payouts prior to killing Eric. Haste also had a record of misconduct. On top of this, there are still officers who were involved in both murders collecting NYPD paychecks to this day.

In other words, the pattern is: officers kill, brutalize and commit misconduct. The NYPD keeps them on the force, often rewarding them with pay increases, and they become repeat offenders. In the worse cases, a family loses a loved one forever. Taxpayers are forced to pick up the tab for these officers' salaries and civil suit payouts.

The Justice Committee used the [See Through NY payroll database](#) to obtain the 2014-2019 salaries of the officers who killed our members' loved ones. Since 2014, the City has paid over \$13.7 million to keep these officers employed by the NYPD. This figure covers the 2014-2019 salaries of officers involved in just ten cases of police killing. Add to this, countless other acts of violence, sexual harassment and assault, and corruption by NYPD officers that go unpunished and it becomes clear that New Yorkers, in particular, Black and brown folks, are being forced to pay for their own abuse while our communities are deprived of the programs and services we need.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has brought systemic inequities in our city into sharp focus and our communities are suffering. Without a dramatic change, of course, we will continue to suffer for a very long time. This is a pivotal moment in which the New York City Council should shift the values of our city's government away from policing and criminalization and towards fulfilling the needs of New Yorkers during the recovery period and beyond. Or, you could maintain the status quo – which will cost lives and devastate families and communities. We are calling with you to #StandWithTheFamilies and stand with New York's Black, Latinx and other communities of color. Do not pass a 2021 budget unless it includes an NYPD hiring freeze, the cancelation of the new cadet class, and cuts that reflect the removal of police from mental health response and other social service roles and the firing of officers for killing, brutality and misconduct.