

MEDIA RELEASE

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PETERS FAMILY STATEMENT ON MARCUS ALERT & COMMUNITY REVIEW BOARDS BILLS

For the past two years, the family of Marcus-David Peters has been fighting alongside many other community activists to hold police officers accountable for behaviors that most adversely affect the Black community, and also ensure that having a mental health crisis does not result in a death sentence.

As is well known, Marcus-David Peters was the young high school biology teacher who was murdered on May 14, 2018, by a Richmond police officer while experiencing a mental health crisis. The Peters family has been fighting for several demands, two that are now bills being carried during the General Assembly Special Session are: a Marcus Alert System that would provide for mental health professionals to be the first responders to a suspected or confirmed mental health crisis, and Independent Civilian Review Boards, with subpoena power, that could investigate incidents of police abuse and issue binding disciplinary determinations.

Our family, along with other advocates, have been working with state legislators to craft bills addressing both concerns in the current special session of the Virginia General Assembly. With the apparent support of these legislators and the continuing public pressure of months of anti-racist protests sparked by the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, we have been cautiously hopeful that these bills could result in real progress toward a more just and equitable society.

Unfortunately, our legislators have fallen short on delivering the robust, progressive, crucial, legislative changes that are being demanded by their constituents.

The Marcus Alert

The Peters family and other community advocates have been working closely with state Sen. Jennifer McClellan on a bill that would establish a Marcus Alert, a system in which mental health professionals alongside peer recovery specialist are the first responders to a suspected or confirmed mental health crisis with a police officer only present as back in the event that the scene becomes unsafe or unstable, law enforcement officers will only be allowed to use non-lethal force. Unfortunately, the Democratic Party Caucus in the state Senate has decided to ignore the bill introduced by Sen. McClellan, a Black woman, in favor of one submitted by Sen. Jeremy McPike, a white man, which does not include the essential features of the McClellan bill. With a 12-1 vote the decision was made to merge the bills, with Senator McPike's bill positioned as the dominate bill, wiping out the Marcus Alert bill.

Specifically, the McPike bill does not include any clarification as to whether the police or mental health professionals would be in charge of the response effort; any stipulations that police would only be allowed to use non-lethal means of restraint; any provisions for accountability; and any provisions for community care. In addition, there is no mention that Senator McPike's bill / mental health proposal would be named the "Marcus Alert", after the person whose situation led to its creation, as other systems have been (Amber Alert, Ashanti Bill and more.) The community expects that our state legislators will pass the "Marcus Alert" bill as written and carried by Senator Jennifer McClellan and Delegate Jeff Bourne, that mandates the Marcus Alert System be implemented statewide.

Civilian Review Boards

Our family also has been working closely with Sen. Ghazala Hashmi on a bill to create independent Civilian Review Boards, with subpoena power, to investigate allegations of police abuse.

In its current form, Sen. Hashmi's bill has some very positive aspects, but falls short of our demands by (1) only "enabling", not mandating, that localities create Civilian Review Boards, and (2) not explaining how board members would be selected. We have been demanding elected boards, but the current bill would allow board members to be appointed.

Taken together, these two deficiencies would mean that any locality could decline to create such a board, or, if it did decide to create one, could ensure that its members would not seriously challenge police practices.

Because of these severe deficiencies in both bills, our family is publicly declaring that we cannot in good conscience support either the McPike mental health bill, or the Hashmi bill for Civilian Review Boards. We refuse to declare false victories when it is clear that no victories have been won.

We are aware that other advocates may support these bills, but our family will continue to fight for real progressive reform, not token excuses for change that only allow the Democratic Party which is the majority in both the House and Senate to claim credit for progress that has in fact not been accomplished. Amend the CRB bill and pass the Marcus Alert Bill.

As James Baldwin so accurately stated, “ We can disagree and still love each other, unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist”.

We the people will Not give up, we will Not back down!

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