



MARYLAND
LEGAL AID

Advancing
Human Rights and
Justice for All

Official Statement

June 4, 2020

Maryland Legal Aid Responds to the Unjustifiable Homicide of George Floyd and the Resulting Nationwide Civil Unrest

The events that have unfolded over the past week, which stem from the horrifying death of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement, signify society's failure to protect fundamental human rights. The challenges of this moment in American history are daunting, complicated, and unprecedented on multiple fronts. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to shape a new, normal way of life, and the related shutdown of the economy, a historical and troubling aspect of the American underbelly has erupted, once again.

Essentially, three major facets of American (and global) life—public health, the economy, and race relations—have been engulfed in a maelstrom of conflict and confusion. The pain, suffering, and hardships that flow from this triple threat have contributed to the resurgence of deep questioning of traditional American values, of a commitment to those values, and of the equal application of those values for African Americans and other people of color within this country.

Five years ago, we witnessed up close the civil unrest in Baltimore City that followed the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody. We felt anguish, frustration, and despair, much like our feelings today. While we were able to funnel those emotions into positive forward-thinking service delivery, we find ourselves, once again, witnessing the inalienable rights of people and communities of color being trampled and violated, and we have seen callous and casual disregard for their right to equality before the law. What will it take for people of color in America to be viewed, respected, and treated with dignity and seen as equals to others? That is one fundamental question of the moment.

The search for answers has become particularly urgent in light of the recent, brutal, murderous act of a Minneapolis police officer, who for 8 minutes and 46 seconds mercilessly pressed his knee down on the neck of an unarmed black man—George Floyd—who remained handcuffed with his body and face pinned to the ground with the assistance of other Minneapolis police officers. This horrific incident has given rise to a string of daily protests and demonstrations in cities all over the country and abroad. The common cry is for justice—to be done as quickly as possible—and for true justice for people of color to become an integral and irreversible part of American life. The murder of George Floyd and the resulting unrest have led to much grief, loss, outrage, impatience, and soul-searching.

Those straining to be heard have the constitutional right to protest and to assemble freely without being subject to the unjustified or disproportionate use of force. Let it be clear and unequivocal: the treatment of black Americans and other people of color as an underclass must cease. It is equally critical for us not to be distracted or sidelined by violence and destruction carried out by a few misguided or ill-intentioned parties, as their actions will not smooth the path toward the needed solution.

Entrenched, discriminatory law enforcement practices that result in differential treatment on the basis of race are contradictory to the foundation of the United States' legal system. The underlying societal views and structures that allow for the disparate and brutal treatment of individuals of color need to be addressed in order to create substantive, long-lasting change and ensure human rights and dignity for all.

One outcome that will not be acceptable is a return to the status quo after the unfolding events have ended and become a memory. On the contrary, this is an opportunity—a mandate if you will—for individuals and institutions to take stock and commit to goals, plans, and actions that are irrepressibly geared towards the recognition and treatment of black people and other people of color in America and beyond as human beings deserving of dignity, respect, and justice.

Maryland Legal Aid, in 2010, adopted a human rights framework to guide its work on behalf of low-income and other vulnerable people. More specifically, that work seeks to ensure, protect, and advance the tenet that basic human needs are basic human rights, and that all people are entitled to these rights. The recognition and preservation of dignity and respect for all is a core value of the human rights framework. Those of us who are affiliated with Maryland Legal Aid are charged, both individually and collectively, with the mandate to discharge and maximize our respective roles in the ongoing quest to make equal treatment before the law a reality for all.

Now is the time for people of all ages, races, and ethnicities, and backgrounds to come together and put their collective energy into doubling down to create and inspire real change.