

June 18, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Support for the *Justice in Policing Act of 2020*

Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, and Leader McCarthy:

Disability Rights Oregon upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. The nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential. For more than 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon's Federally authorized Protection & Advocacy system.

We strongly support the *Justice in Policing Act of 2020*, new legislation introduced to reform policing in the United States. We urge you to enact the bill as soon as possible.

The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael Lorenzo Dean, and others focused the world's eyes on a repugnant fact: Black Americans are killed by police because of their race, and very often the people who commit those acts of racist violence are not held to account. Disability Rights Oregon vehemently condemns racism, police brutality, and rejects white supremacy. First and foremost, we recognize the humanity of Black Americans and the fundamental human rights with which every individual is born. And we recognize that, Black Americans, and people of every race, religion, and gender, are part of the disability community.

The convergence of both race and disability puts an individual at enormous risk of becoming a victim of police violence. According to some estimates, nearly half of police killings involve people with disabilities,¹ including Deborah Danner, a 66-year old Black woman with schizophrenia in New York City, Michelle Cussaux, a 50-year old Black woman who experienced mental illness in Phoenix, Andre Gladen, a 36-year-old Black man killed by police in Portland, Oregon who experienced blindness and mental illness, and Keith Lamont Scott, a Black man with a disability in Charlotte. All were killed by police in recent years. Black people with disabilities—whether they're deaf, hard of hearing, blind, low vision, have a mental illness, or experience an intellectual or developmental disability—are at heightened risk of being killed when interacting with law enforcement.

Through Disability Rights Oregon's police reform work, we've witnessed the glaring racial disparities in whether a person with mental illness who is in crisis gets taken to a hospital for treatment or gets locked inside a jail cell. We've seen the need for our community mental health system to do a better job of including people of color and offering culturally informed care. Our investigative reports pointed to data indicating significant racial disparities across multiple areas in the Multnomah County Detention Center, including how Black people are overrepresented in Multnomah County jail's population. For example, African American people appear almost twice as likely to be disciplined, twice as likely to be subjected to physical force, and almost twice as likely to be "voluntarily" restrained.

The police are not the right responders in those circumstances. Their uniforms, weapons, the inherent threat of force and arrest, and the profoundly painful history of recent and recurring killing of Black community members makes the mere presence of law enforcement at the scene an escalating and fear-inducing factor.

Police need clear expectations, policies, and procedures for interacting with people—whether they're interacting with a Black person, a person in mental health crisis, or a Black person in mental health crisis. And if officers fail to follow proper procedures they must face serious consequences. Deadly force is unacceptable. Choke holds are unacceptable. Strangleholds are unacceptable. If a police officer kills a person, accountability for deadly force will serve justice, deter the future use of force, and engender community trust.

In doing our work, Disability Rights Oregon is dedicated to the intersections of injustice that plague people with disabilities, including police violence against Black Oregonians with disabilities. As we work to protect the rights of people with disabilities, we recognize our duty to shine a brighter spotlight on and call out the undeniable truth—that Black people with disabilities are more likely to be killed by police than white people with disabilities and are treated worse than white people with disabilities within the whole criminal justice system.

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We urge you to immediately consider and pass the *Justice in Policing Act of 2020*.

Sincerely,



Jake Cornett
Executive Director
Disability Rights Oregon

CC: The Honorable Cory Booker, United States Senator, 717 Hart Senate Office Building,
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kamala D. Harris, United States Senator, 112 Hart Senate Office
Building, Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Karen Bass, Congressional Black Caucus Chair, 2059 Rayburn
House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler, Judiciary Committee Chair, 2132 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

¹ The Ruderman Family Foundation, "White Paper: Disability and Police Violence," 2016.