



www.blackparentsworkshop.org

P.O. Box 762

Maplewood, New Jersey 07040

(201) 259-8375

blackparentsworkshop@gmail.com

Statement of Walter L. Fields, Jr.
Chairman, SOMA Black Parents Workshop
Maplewood Township Committee Meeting
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My name is Walter Fields, and I am a 20-year resident of Maplewood, and Chairman of the Black Parents Workshop.

In 1990, in my role as a Board member of the Bergen County NAACP, I served as the liaison to the New Jersey Attorney General when a young Black male, 16-year old Phillip Pannell, was shot in the back, with his arms raised in surrender, and killed by a white Teaneck police officer. Teaneck, like Maplewood and South Orange, boasted of its diversity and progressive roots. It literally went up in flames after that young man was killed.

A year later as the state NAACP Political Director I chaired an all-day public hearing on police brutality. We took testimony from victims, county prosecutors, police chiefs, criminal defense attorneys, activists and citizens. The horror stories we heard are similar to what we viewed this past week on the video from July 5, 2016. In fact, we took that testimony to Governor Jim Florio and he subsequently issued the first executive order against racial profiling in the state's history. I would later support the efforts of Black New Jersey State Troopers who filed a lawsuit against the state based upon their first-hand experiences of citizens' rights being violated.

So, having been directly involved in efforts to address racial profiling, I know a thing or two about bad policing.

Tonight, I come before the Township Committee to demand the dismissal of Chief Robert Cimino and those officers who inflicted bodily harm upon our youth on the evening of July 5, 2016. They do not deserve to wear the uniform of the Maplewood Police Department and our communities should not pay the salaries of any officer that cannot uphold and respect the law, and cannot respect our children. Tomorrow, we are transmitting a letter to the state Attorney General requesting that his office conduct an investigation into the events of July 5, 2016, and while doing so assume oversight of the Maplewood police department.

The behavior of the Maplewood Police Department on the evening of July 5, 2016 was reprehensible and an abuse of power. It represented a callous disregard for the lives of children and youth, and was a textbook case of racial profiling and police brutality. If it was not, then we should have videotape of Maplewood police officers marching white children down Ridgewood Road toward Millburn, and using excessive force against them.

By directing the youth to Irvington, our police department was also putting these young people at risk of violating a local curfew in that community that prohibits unaccompanied youth under the age of 16 from being on the streets after 10:00 pm. That did not matter to Chief Cimino when he barked his command to “send ‘em East!”

There are more questions than answers at this point.

Why did the township delay the release of the audio and videotapes when it was clear that after the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office finished its criminal investigation, the recordings could have been released? The recent unanimous New Jersey Supreme Court ruling in *NJMG v. Lyndhurst* vindicated those of us who had been demanding the release of the recordings.

Who within the municipal government viewed the videotapes and when?

Why did you sign-off on disciplinary measures against the officers involved in the use of excessive force before the completion of your own investigation and the release of the audio and video recordings?

What was the basis of the disciplinary measures taken? Was it reports from other officers on the scene, eyewitness accounts from citizens or **was it the videotapes**? If it was the video, then the punishment does not fit the offense.

Who are the officers who have been disciplined and why are their identities being concealed? The public has a right-to-know the identities of public servants that have betrayed our trust.

Let me also address the Community Coalition on Race, since it receives funding from our two local governments. One year ago, you sponsored a community forum, Not in Our Two Towns, that was nothing more than a cover for our police department. Young people who voiced legitimate outrage over the events of July 5, 2016 were denied the opportunity to speak their truth. Instead, a meaningless pledge was signed in what turned out to be a “Blue Lives Matter” pep rally. CCR is a quasi-governmental entity. You cannot be an advocate on issues of race and justice when you are part of the institutional machinery from which injustices occur. For over one-year CCR was silent when our children were demanding justice. You have no credibility if you place property values over the value of our children’s lives.

Justice is not a branding exercise or a spectator sport. Justice requires the persistent demand for truth, the courage to speak when others choose silence, and a relentless spirit that is determined to address issues that are offensive to the human condition. Protecting the status quo, when the lives of children and young people are stake, is morally offensive and reprehensible. We do not have the luxury to engage in meaningless dialogues or community forums, in the absence of truth.

And to our collective clergy community, your holy commission calls you to be a voice for equity and justice. You have a responsibility to speak truth to power, and to align against the powerful when they abuse the powerless. If your focus is not on “the least of these” then you have betrayed your calling. You are not entitled to the mantra of leadership simply because of your position in a pulpit. If your principal concern is not transforming society and creating communities “on earth as it is in heaven” then you should expect the meek, the powerless, the dispossessed, the abused and the weary to hear your call as unintelligible babble.

Lastly, I want to commend Columbia High School teacher Thomas Whitaker for his enduring commitment to our youth. While our school district remained silent, Mr. Whitaker showed us that the role of an excellent teacher extends beyond the walls of a school building. I am grateful for his presence in our community. As I am for the Village Green, for its refusal to stop asking questions and fulfilling the honorable role of journalists as is the first principle of the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists – Seek Truth and Report It.

We are not deterred by delay or impatient by obstruction, but we are determined that the human rights of Black children and youth in Maplewood and South Orange will be respected. And, we will not cease in our vocal and persistent advocacy until this Township does right by our children. Thank you.