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Baltimore City Council hearing in response to community outrage over three police killings

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"Mental health should not be a death sentence," words said by Zeke Cohen, City Council President, at the second crisis response meeting held at City Hall.

This was a continuum meeting called last month on police accountability for three deaths caused by Baltimore police — Bilal BJ Abduallah, Phtorcarcha Brooks and Dontae Melton Jr.

BJ Abduallah was known in the neighborhood as a beloved Arabber martyred by police gunfire.

Throughout the long three hours taken up by city officials to point fingers at different agencies. A lot of discrepancies were uncovered with disappointment of the community, such as \$10 million allocated by the courts to be spent merely on

advertising for 988, an already-lacking system in place.

The 988 number is a suicide hotline and prevention number which is supposed to be used to divert 911 mental health calls. Less than 1% of calls were diverted.

That system was not effective when it came to Ms. Brooks; she was a 70-year-old woman who had a history of mental health issues. Police have been to her home about 20 times before her last interaction with police.

After kicking Ms. Brooks' door down, police entered to allegedly take her to the hospital. Ambushed and confused, Ms. Brooks saw that her home was breached. She held a knife for defense as the BPD tried to detain her. An officer attempted to deploy a taser to no avail. The officer then fired his gun, which struck Ms. Brooks twice.

In a heartfelt speech, Ms. Brooks' brother talked about how the system failed their family. They suffer the trauma of their family member being talked about as a number and statistic.

Dontae Melton Jr.'s death was skirted around and purposely not directly addressed. The full body cam footage and the ruling of his death were released on the same day of the hearing. Melton was seen in the footage approaching the officer, asking for help.

Officer Gerard Petitiford radioed in, "I have a gentleman pulling on my doors asking for help but he doesn't look like he needs help." Melton's feet and hands were shackled. Ten police officers stood around for 50 minutes as Melton passed away, with the fire department less than 3 minutes away and Mercy Hospital 2 minutes away.

The police department vows to train 100% of officers in CIT to improve safety for mental crisis encounters. Currently, 23% of BPD have had this training. In other

publications, Police Commissioner Richard Worley has said that, because of the understaffing of police officers, they allowed officers to volunteer to take training. Blaming the failure of officers on the faulty CAD system, which has failed five times before already.

Ms. Bailey, one of the citizens who testified, said it best: "What I realized sitting here for three hours is that I'll never get a solution."

Members of the council and the mayor are complicit when it comes to the healing of Baltimoreans. The mayor complied when BPD pleaded for an increase in the police budget in June, a week before officers killed three members of the community.

Almost everyone who testified that night said the community does not need more policing as a solution to healing. Testimony from Alec Summerfield for PPA (People's Power Assembly) emphasized health care, not handcuffs. A separate department develops Community Mental Health Navigators, who would be hired to work at outposts across the city. Navigators will have the following roles.

1. Conduct community outreach / relationally organize to advertise their services.
2. Screen for anxiety, depression, and stress.
3. Identify and manage risk as part of a treatment team, including an on-call licensed supervisor.
4. Provide mental health referrals and broader social service referrals, as needed.
5. Educate about mental health.

This issue at hand is systemic; it cannot be changed with those who succumb to the imperialist system. The CIT training is supposed to be a step to reform policing, though the language of the program suggests otherwise.

Safety cannot be achieved if the officers who arrive at the scene are trained to take people to jail. CIT has existed from 1988, yet so many people have died by police during mental health crises. Dontae Melton's story resembles Oral Nunis's, a father worried about finances who threatened to jump out his second-story home in 2020. Upon arrival, an officer with cuffs in his hands ordered Nunis to comply. This led to Nunis' death because of "legal restraint," while the three officers met no repercussions.

The AP has reported over 1,036 deaths after being subdued by police from 2012 to 2021. Not counting the countless cases purposely hidden and filed incorrectly. It shouldn't take a 40-hour training to humanize the community the police swore to serve. Out of 1,036 deaths, only 28 cases had some accountability of officers' charges. A lot of these cases end up with the police getting acquitted in federal jury trials.

We cannot move forward with qualified immunity in the U.S. if we expect to have accountability. The book is constantly being thrown at the marginalized and the poor, but almost always, the police and those with authority skip over the repercussions of the law.

The court filing of Barnes v. Felix is an important case of the use of force. Ashtian Barnes was murdered by Harris County, Texas, police officer Roberto Felix Jr. Barnes was pulled over for outstanding tolls in a rental car. Barnes, afraid for his life, drove off, resulting in Officer Felix firing into Barnes' vehicle. The Supreme Court, 9-0, rejected the "moment of threat" doctrine used by some lower courts to allow excessive police force. The unanimous 9-0 decision means officers must be trained with non-lethal tools to prevent situations from escalating to "use of force."



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