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Maryland Public Defenders March for Black Lives and Demand Racial Justice

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Today, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, in collaboration with Public Defenders for Racial Justice and defender offices across the county, rallied in front of the Mitchell Courthouse in Baltimore to support the #BlackLivesMatter movement and voice our opposition to the racist systems and institutions that have run unchecked for far too long.

“This march is part of a national movement of public defenders standing up for our clients and Black lives everywhere,” said Paul DeWolfe, Maryland Public Defender. “Public defender offices large and small are marching today in unity to protest the deaths of people of color at the hands of police.”

DeWolfe continued:

“The police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have put a recent spotlight on the everyday dangers that we’ve seen locally -- mostly notably with the police killing of our client Freddie Gray five years ago this past April. Things need to change. A recent report by the Justice Policy Institute found that Maryland has the largest population of Black prisoners. We can and must do better. The institutions and practices that commit and perpetuate this violence must end -- around the country and across Maryland, including here in Baltimore.”

Kirsten Downs, District Public Defender for Baltimore City, also spoke at the rally about the importance of public defenders raising their voices and what we demand:

We stand in this space and we demand justice.

We stand here on the steps of the Clarence Mitchell Jr. Courthouse.

We stand in the legacy of Maryland’s Great Black Freedom Fighters, including Frederick Douglass and Freedom Warrior Harriet Tubman.

We stand amidst the dark stain of racial violence and racial injustice – devised by our government leaders, carried out by our police forces and fueled by a culture of racism.

We stand in a time when you can turn on your television and see black man murdered in the streets by police.

We stand in a time where black women are murdered in their homes by police- in their own beds -- and no one is present to bear witness.

We stand in a time where no black mother believes their child is safe – no matter how many “talks” they have or no matter how old their children become. Times have shown

that you cannot be too old or too young for police brutality.

We stand in this space where current criminal justice reforms have only exposed the systemic racism of our legal system leaving black people behind - held without bail, detained and over-sentenced.

We stand in a time when lack of access has been criminalized – when being sick, homeless, unemployed, uninsured, and undereducated are all good reasons to incarcerate black people.

It is amazing that so many of us are still standing – but we are and we are here we are still fighting.

As Public Defender we are witnesses:

- Witnesses to the violence of mass incarceration
- Witnesses to the violence of the over-policing of black and brown people
- Witnesses to state sanctioned lynching our black bodies
- Witnesses to the brutality of the war on our black and brown children
- Witnesses to the destruction of our black communities
- Witnesses to the dehumanization of our clients from every corner of the criminal justice system

• We stand in this space - we are the Defenders

- We will call out racism and racial injustice in the courtrooms
- We will stand with our clients and their communities and speak justice into being
- we will examine ourselves, our agencies, our policies and our interactions – get our house in order.
- We will take our fight from the courts to our communities and to our streets

We must stand in this space and in this time and demand justice:

- We demand a criminal justice system that values black lives
- We demand a government that values and supports black communities
- We demand a country that lifts up our black children
- We demand a country where feeling safe is no longer a luxury denied black and brown lives
- We demand the dismantling of systemic racism in our offices, our state, our cities and our courts

Today we stand for Black Lives Matter. We Stand for Black Rights Matter. We stand for Black Communities Matter. We stand for Black Families Matter.

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