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REPLY TO: Miami

June 28, 2020

Candyce Phoenix
Democratic Staff Director
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

Re: LaToya Ratlieff Briefing Testimony
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

Dear Ms. Phoenix:

Please find attached a copy of the testimony of LaToya Ratlieff for the Congressional briefing set for June 29, 2020.

Respectfully submitted,



Benedict P. Kuehne
Michael T. Davis

Encl. Briefing Testimony of LaToya Ratlieff

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee.

Good morning. My name is LaToya Ratlieff.

I want to thank the Committee and the U.S. Congress for inviting me to share my story with the American public and its leadership.

In 1964, my great aunt Fannie Lou Hamer sat in front of the credentials committee of the Democratic National Committee on the eve of the convention.

She told the story of how she and 17 other freedom riders risked their lives to register to vote, and how police used to intimidate, assault, and violate the civil rights of her and other citizens who had broken no laws but had simply attempted to exercise their right to register to vote.

They called her “nigger,” arrested her, and took her to a cell where she was beaten mercilessly.

My great aunt was famously sick and tired of being sick and tired. I never met Fannie Lou Hamer, but I have always felt her spirit with me as I have exercised my First Amendment rights to speak out against racial inequality in policing. Her legacy of activism was ingrained in me as a young girl, and I attended my first civil rights rally when I was only 9 or 10 years old.

She suffered permanent injuries at the hands of the police. I still don't know if I have. As I sit here today, I have limited to no vision in my right eye. Doctors don't know if that will change. All I can do is wait and remain optimistic that my vision will be restored.

Like hundreds of millions of people around the world, I was shocked and disgusted by the murder of George Floyd by the police. I wanted to do something. I heard about the civil demonstrations and joined in. I first attended the one in Miami on May 30th. It was eye-opening and momentous. A diverse crowd of all races and ages coming together as a unified voice for social and racial justice. We exercised our First Amendment rights without incident or violence from the police.

Because of this experience, I decided to attend another demonstration the following afternoon. As I walked through Fort Lauderdale that day, I looked around. I saw a diverse group of people who shared a common goal. I saw young, old, black, white, Hispanic, and every other demographic you could imagine. At one point some of us took a knee to show we were no threat and meant the police no harm. At other demonstrations, the police actually joined the demonstrators in taking a knee. Not here. The police began firing tear gas and began shooting rubber bullets at the crowd. Directly at me.

I will forever be scarred by the police shooting me in the head on May 31, 2020. Fort Lauderdale Police Officer Eleazar Ramos shot me, an unarmed woman, in the head with a rubber bullet. I was a peaceful civil advocate. I broke no law. I took no aggressive action towards anyone. I was merely exercising my First Amendment right – my duty actually – to

speak out against police brutality. While speaking for victims of police violence, I became the very victim I was there to support. I am a victim of senseless police violence aimed at silencing my voice and my presence. The police knew then, and admit that, I engaged in NO WRONGDOING at all. More than four weeks later, I still await the full scope of evidence the City of Fort Lauderdale has denied me and the American people.

25 days after incident reports were filed, which make no claim that I did anything unlawful or wrong, I still await an apology from Officer Ramos, Chief Maglione, or anyone in leadership in the City of Fort Lauderdale.

Rather than an apology, what I have received from the City is repeated criticism of my decision to exercise my First Amendment rights. First, in a comment to the Miami Herald, which questioned my right to be there – in a public space -- on the day I was shot, and repeatedly in subsequent statements to the press. Less than 48 hours ago, the Police Chief issued yet another statement that attacked me for speaking to you today about what happened. It was sent to the press and posted by the Fort Lauderdale Police Department's twitter account as a reply to news articles about my upcoming appearance in front of this committee.

I have sought a meeting with the City, but rather than speak to me, the Police Department seems intent on continuing their relentless attack on me. Since demonstrating their violent opposition for the First Amendment on May 31, they have continued their assault on my First Amendment rights in the month since. I know they're watching this morning, so I'd like to say this as clearly as I can – if you want to work together to make needed changes, I'm ready to sit down and talk. But if you think you're going to silence me with rubber bullets or attempts to intimidate me via the press, you thought wrong.

While I seem to be the person who was most significantly injured at the hands of the Fort Lauderdale Police that day, I am by no means the only one. A published photo seems to show the damage done to a young man who was shot in the face. Multiple witnesses claim to have seen two black men shot from behind with rubber bullets as they escaped tear gas. A white photographer ran between them and was not shot. He is one of the witnesses.

In what was a diverse crowd of people raising our voices for justice, excessive force and targeting of black people seems to have been the standard for the Fort Lauderdale Police.

I appreciate those people who honor the oath they took and demonstrate the courage, sacrifice, and dedication so many associate with the badge. It takes a special kind of person to be willing to run towards danger when others run from it. We entrust those people with immense power. What we don't do is consistently hold them accountable for abusing that immense power. Too often, police unions make the rules that allow for bad cops to continue to abuse their power and harm the public. Too often, the systems which are supposed to create accountability and justice end up failing until, and sometimes even after someone is murdered.

If you want an idea of just how much police officers believe they are immune from accountability, watch the video of George Floyd's murder, and remember this one fact – each of the officers who participated in his murder knew they were on camera. For eight minutes and forty-six seconds, those officers participated in a murder knowing the evidence of it was being documented. Ask yourself why. Ask yourself what kind of mindset it takes to believe that you can lawfully do this to a human being.

In the civil rights era of my great aunt, Americans fought for the rights that have allowed some of you to serve on this committee. They fought for incremental change. Though I recognize that progress is often achieved incrementally, the time for incremental improvements to equality and justice for people who look like me has passed. We must entirely close the gap that divides the treatment most of you enjoy and the treatment that millions of people of color in this country suffer.

This can no longer be an issue of black and white. It must be an American issue. It must be an issue that bridges the gap between political parties.

My story is not unique. I sit on a panel today with a journalist who lost her eye so the world could hear stories like mine.

I sit here today because Miami Herald journalists Sarah Blaskey and Nick Nehemas told my story and because of countless others who have dedicated themselves to being the eyes and ears of the public.

I also want Black people in America to come to a point where a routine traffic stop doesn't make them fear for their lives. Where protests are unnecessary, but if they become necessary, people don't risk their lives to exercise their First Amendment rights.

It is grueling to regularly watch videos of trauma, let alone be the victim in one. For Black people, we have had to live in this country for far too long without truly being free. Without truly being safe. Constantly having to justify our right to simply exist. And now as we approach weeks and weeks of coming together and demonstrating, I'm thankful for those continuously on the front lines protecting Black Life. I'm grateful for everyone who has continued to do the difficult work of reclaiming our rights and tirelessly advocating for our community who has been made victim by state condoned racism.