

Good afternoon and thank you to the Presidential Advisors of Penn Public safety Review and Outreach Initiative, Dorothy Roberts, J.D. and Charles Howard, Ph.D. for inviting me to offer testimony at this hearing.

I am Dr. Valerie Dorsey Allen, Director of Penn's African-American Resource Center. I am an alum of the School of Social Policy and Practice where I received MSW and DSW degrees and I am a current student in Penn's Biomedical Ethics program. My mother was also an alum and worked at the University. I grew up in West Philadelphia and spent many evenings in Van Pelt library, while my mother was studying for her Master's degree in Social Work. I often say I grew up at Penn and I feel a great sense of belonging and connection to the Penn Community. My exposure as a child, a student, an alum, a lecturer have given me a unique and deep understanding of the terrain of Penn. In my role as the Director of AARC, I have had the privilege and responsibility of hearing reports of faculty, staff and students who have felt what they describe as the sting of racial and social injustice on and around Penn's campus.

The missions of Public Safety and the African-American Resource Center (AARC) start similarly by saying our mission is to enhance the quality of life of our communities. One of the ways we do this is by establishing relationships. As Vice President Maureen Rush says, "Its all about relationships." I feel very privileged to have a relationship of trust and support with Vice President Maureen Rush and many other members of Penn Police. AARC enjoys a strong relationship with Penn's Division of Public Safety. My office participates in the interview process for new officers and we feel our comments and input is valued. We also speak with all new recruits during their introductory period. I use this time to talk to them about the importance of developing relationships with and getting to know members of the Black community. While these relationships and activities make me feel comfortable and safe, when my teenage son is on campus, I still give him warnings. You see, he looks like any other Black teenage boy. He doesn't have a sign that says, "I am not a threat". I make sure he knows VP Rush's name and that he knows how to respond if stopped by the police. I, like every parent of a Black child, has given the talk that I hope will get my child home alive at the end of the day, even from a trip to Penn's campus.

I, like many members of the Penn community, am outraged by the killing of members of the Black community, nationwide, by police officers. The most recent shooting of Jacob Blake, and the manner in which he was shot, in the midst of protests calling for police reform leaves my community feeling unheard, unimportant, uncared about and unsafe. While we have not had such a tragedy at Penn, it is important to remember that while we are examining if we create "a physically and emotionally safe environment on Penn's campus and surrounding community" that Penn does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in the middle of everything that is happening in West Philadelphia and around the world. It exists in a racist America where Black and Brown people still have the highest infant mortality rates (11.0 for Non-Hispanic Black vs 4.7 for Non-Hispanic White) (cdc.org), the highest COVID mortality rates (88.4 for Blacks vs 40.4 for Whites per 100,000) (APMresearchlab.org) and the highest arrest rates (6,109.6 for Blacks vs 2,795.3 for Whites per 100,000) (ojjdp.gov) than any other people. The Black and Brown students that come to Penn's campus and that live in the area policed by Penn's public safety, have the same

levels of fear, stress and unjust policing that makes them feel unsafe. They feel as unsafe as our brothers and sisters feel in Minneapolis, Kenosha, Sanford, Baltimore, and across the country. I know this because my Penn clients tell me this!

It is also important to know that while most people will not be a victim of or even witness a police shooting, the impact of hearing about it over and over and over again creates similar levels of PTSD as if you witnessed it first-hand (Allen & Solomon, 2012). That means that our public safety officers and department must keep in mind the impact their uniforms have on Black and Brown people when they come in contact with them in West Philadelphia or ask why a Black or Brown person is on campus or ask a Black or Brown student studying for ID. The goal is to treat “every person with equal dignity and respect”. To show respect (according to Eric Grimes, WURD radio) is to look again, to not just see a stereotype that an officer may have in their minds eye about black and brown bodies but to re-look, re-inspect and see the dignity and worth of every person with whom that officer comes in contact (Grimes, Personal Communication, 2020).

There must be greater transparency of policy and practice of our public safety department and more involvement by Black and Brown communities in advising and/or on the advisory board.

It is “all about relationships” but not just between Public Safety and the West Philadelphia or Black community but relationships must change across campus. AARC works very closely with departments on campus such as the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, the School of Social Policy and Practice, and the Penn Women’s Center - these departments among others reach out to provide support to the community and to welcome the community to access Penn’s resources. We have to offer more of that type of engagement and it is necessary to ensure that everyone knows what is being done. I am aware of a number of wonderful programs and initiatives being done by various departments, including public safety, but many on campus and in the community are unaware of what is being done. These civic engagement activities fit in with Penn’s founder, Ben Franklin’s thoughts about education.

Ben Franklin had a different idea of the purpose of education. It was progressive and novel for his time. According to Ira Harkavy and Matthew Hartley (2008), “What set Franklin’s notion of education apart was his insistence that a college draw students of ability from all social strata and actively and purposefully cultivate civic values in these students and provide them with the practical skills necessary to address the pressing problems of the day. In short, a central purpose of higher education was service to society and to the commonwealth” (Harkavy & Hartley, 2008). If we are fulfilling our founder’s mission, we must provide educational access to diverse communities and supports for success. We must, also, insist that our students and all departments are involved with civic engagement and provide service. We must utilize our great Penn resources for the betterment and support of our Penn and surrounding community.

Beyond civic engagement, some colleges and universities are requiring students, staff and faculty to take an anti-racism course. This is one of the ways we could begin to address and

eradicate racism that impacts on our relationships with the West Philadelphia community. An ongoing anti-racism training program for all public safety officers is also needed. Finally, we must reprioritize our funding to provide additional social service, educational, health and outreach programs for the community. There is a way for both police funding and social service funding to exist together.

Racism is insidious and must be approached from multiple angles. There is definitely a need for police reform in America. There is a need for greater transparency and community involvement in Penn's Public Safety. There needs to be a recognition and understanding of the lack of trust that Black and Brown people, both on and off campus have of police officers including Penn Police. There is a need for the Penn community as a whole to engage and provide more support for the community. Martin Luther King, Jr. said "Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life...Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual and physical homicide upon the out-group" (Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967). We must put an end to the bloodletting in Black and Brown communities, especially those shootings and murders perpetrated by the police. We must find ways to make Dr. King's dream of a beloved community a safe and respectful reality.

Thank you.

References

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