

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Amy Kobeta, PCCY
347-607-1058 mobile
amyk@pccy.org

City Groups Raise Alarm about Lack of Mental, Behavioral Health Supports *Ask to Meet with Mayor Kenney to Discuss Next Steps*

PHILADELPHIA (December 1, 2020) – In the wake of the shooting death of Walter Wallace, Jr., 31 organizations that serve Philadelphia children and families are sounding the alarm about the lack of mental and behavioral health services.

In a letter to Mayor Kenney today, they wrote “As organizations dedicated to the cause of improving the lives of the City’s children, we write today out of concern for the failures of the City’s infrastructure and policy shooting of this obviously sick man. Children across this city listened, learned, and now, have watched this incident. We know it has scared them and it has scarred them.”

These groups, representing a range of sectors including health, early education, community development, and legal services, identified three areas where improvements can begin:

1. Pair police officers with behavioral health consultants when needed.
2. Focus police training on de-escalation.
3. Expand services to support children coping with racially-motivated police violence.

“We do not have all the answers. But we believe it is urgent that we meet with you to discuss ways that the City can demonstrate to children that this is a community where they can feel safe for themselves and those they care about; that they can count on those working for the City to protect them and their families from harm; and that we truly value every life,” wrote Frank Cervone, Executive Director of Support Center for Child Advocates, who penned the letter on behalf of the group.

(Letter attached)

December 1, 2020

Honorable Jim Kenney
Mayor
City of Philadelphia
City Hall Room 215
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Mayor Kenney,

We write today as colleagues in service to children and families in Philadelphia. Our hearts are heavy as we mourn the loss of yet another Black man to police and racial violence. The manifest injustice and gross inadequacy of police response to these personal crises and what should be benign events, which we have seen in tragedies across the nation and which have festered here for a long time, now have a new and present reality in our community in the death of Mr. Wallace.

We sincerely believe that you agree that Walter Wallace Jr. should not have died. He should not have been shot. He needed help. We must affirm today and every day that this violence is unacceptable, that we need a radically different valuing of human life, that Black Lives Matter. If there is to be any lasting justice to come from his death, all of us must learn from this.

Underneath and fundamental to all of this, our entire community must recognize the roles of race and racism inside and among us. We have a long history of racism in Philadelphia and in the Police Department. We can do better going forward. We all have so much work to do.

As organizations dedicated to the cause of improving the lives of the City's children, we write today out of concern for the failures of the City's infrastructure and police shooting of this obviously sick man. Children across this city listened, learned, and now, have watched this incident. We know it has scared them and it has scarred them.

Far too many of the children in this city have fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, who like Mr. Wallace, need intensive support from our mental health systems. In our society it is sadly a rare privilege to get the help that one needs for mental health problems, both in desperate times such as Mr. Wallace experienced, and much more frequently in response to common needs for treatment and care. The message sent is that our children cannot rely on anyone, even the government, to protect their loved ones in a time of mental health crisis. The stress, pain and fear they must be internalizing as they consider the implications for their own family are unimaginable?

Before this shooting, perhaps some children took solace in the fact that George Floyd was killed by police officers in the far away city of Minneapolis. Now, they know the same defensive reaction, that rapidly devalues life is part and parcel of how police are trained and operate in Philadelphia. It is hard to overstate the chilling effect that our home-grown reality is having on our children. How can they feel there is anyone they can call upon to keep them safe?

We hope you agree that as important as law enforcement can be to the safety and well-being of our communities, officers should not respond to mental-health crisis calls alone. Immediately, the City should guarantee the availability of a behavioral health consultant at the 911 Call Center to assist both 911 callers and the responding officers, and to provide a direct connection between police patrol officers and Mobile Crisis Response units.

Second, police training and daily assignments should continually focus on de-escalation. We look for City government to go deeper in reforming police training programs, ending excessive use of force, changing the practice of police on the street, and bringing forward the crisis intervention models that we know work.

Third, our communities and especially our children need healing. Children across the City are being affected by these events, responding with anxiety and trauma. Everything we do is teaching them.

We do not have all the answers. But we believe it is urgent that we meet with you to discuss ways that the City can demonstrate to children that this is a community where they can feel safe for themselves and those they care about; that they can count on those working for the City to protect them and their families from harm, and; that we truly value every life.

Our children are watching and if we want a safer, more compassionate City we must show them a different way to react and to live.

The following organizations join ...

ASAP/After School Activities Partnerships

Justin Ennis
Executive Director

Big Brothers Big Sisters Independence

Marcus Allen
Chief Executive Officer

Children's Village

Mary Graham
Executive Director

Chinatown Learning Center

Carol Wong
Executive Director

Clean Water Action

Maurice Sampson
Eastern PA Director

The Consortium, Inc

John White Jr.
CEO President

edEquity in Practice

Kimberly Byrd

Education Law Center

Deborah Klehr
Executive Director

Episcopal Community Services

David Griffith
Executive Director

Federation Early Learning Services

Mark Ornstein
President and CEO

First Up

Carol Austin
Executive Director

HIAS Pennsylvania

Cathryn Miller-Wilson
Executive Director

Indochinese American Council

LeQuyen Vu
Executive Director

KenCrest

Maureen Yamamoto
Government Relations Strategist

Kinder Academy, Inc

Leslie Spina
Executive Director

Legal Clinic for the Disabled

Theresa Brabson
Legal Director

Metropolitan Christian Council of Philadelphia

Rev. Dr. Donna Lawrence Jones

National Nurse-Led Care Consortium

Marygrace Joyce

Policy Specialist

Nationalities Service Center

Gretchen Shanfeld

Director

Norris Square Neighborhood Project

Teresa Elliott

Executive Director

The Parent Infant Center

Debbie Green

Executive Director

Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center

Jeffrey Garis

Outreach Director

People's Emergency Center

Kathy Desmond

President & CEO

Philadelphia Children's Alliance

Paul DiLorenzo

Interim Executive Director

PHMC

Lauren Nestler

Chief Communications & Strategy Officer

POWER

Bishop Dwayne Royster

Executive Director

Public Citizens for Children and Youth

Donna R. Cooper

Executive Director

Public Interest Law Center

Jennifer Clarke
Executive Director

Saint Marys Nursery School

Traci Childress
Executive Director

Sunrise of Philadelphia

Vincent Litrenta
Executive Director

Support Center for Child Advocates

Frank Cervone
Executive Director

Turning Points for Children

David Fair
Deputy Chief Executive Officer

United Communities of Southeast Philadelphia

Francis Carney
Executive Director

Urban League of Philadelphia

Andrea Custis
President & CEO

Wonderspring

Zakiyyah Boone
Chief Executive Officer

CC: Danielle M. Outlaw, Commissioner, Philadelphia Police Department, City of Philadelphia
Tumar Alexander, Managing Director, City of Philadelphia