

August 22, 2017

Charlottesville City Council
City Manager Maurice Jones
Police Chief Al Thomas
City Hall
PO Box 911
Charlottesville, VA 22902

Sent via email and first-class mail

Re: City Actions Surrounding August 12, 2017 Events

Dear City Councilors, City Manager Jones, and Chief Thomas:

We write on behalf of the Public Housing Association of Residents (PHAR), an organization we represent. Many members of PHAR suffered as a result of the actions of white supremacists and the inaction of police during the weekend of August 12, 2017. In the aftermath of the weekend, PHAR residents feel unprotected by those who are sworn to protect them and unsafe in their own city.

We know that you heard at great length from the residents of this City last night that people are angry, concerned, and frightened after the events of August 12. We recognize, too, that these events must have been incredibly challenging for each of you. It would be easy, we are sure, to attempt to stifle the anger many in the community feel. But we write to encourage you to take a different approach here—to create an open and transparent, resident-led investigation of what happened with an eye toward long-term reform of police practices.

We wrote to you immediately after July 8 and asked the City to honestly and transparently review the police practices of that day. We were concerned, as were many community members, that the police had behaved aggressively toward community members. That day left many community members believing that the police were more concerned about protecting the Klan than about protecting community members. To our knowledge, no independent investigation was conducted regarding the events of July 8, and we received no response to our letter from the City. At the City Council meeting immediately following July 8, City Manager Maurice Jones vociferously defended law enforcement's actions and promised that the *police itself* would investigate the police force's actions.

With all due respect for the difficulty of these challenges, this approach is not good enough here, and it will not regain the trust of this community. What is needed here is an immediate commitment to a fully transparent investigation, deeply informed by the affected residents of this community. This should not be conducted by the police, and it should be undertaken in a spirit of openness, not defensiveness.

Had the City honestly and transparently looked at the police practices of July 8, the events of the weekend of August 12 might very well have unfolded differently. The approach taken on the weekend of August 12 by the police was certainly different than the approach taken July 8. On July 8, the police responded with physical force against protesters. On August 12, the police showed up in great numbers, but simply failed to engage to protect community members. Both approaches had one common theme: they left residents feeling profoundly unprotected by the police force sworn to protect them.

This indifference during these two events is emblematic of decades of indifference by the City to its most vulnerable residents, and it rubs salt in the wounds of a community that already feels abandoned by its government. Our community deserves a better approach. Many community members have complained that the police's role in the community has been overly antagonistic toward low-income residents and residents of color for far too long. This moment presents an opportunity for the City to look unflinchingly at police practices and to consider a new approach. We strongly urge you to embrace the opportunity this moment presents for a different way forward.

We share with you some of the specific concerns that PHAR members have raised with us. We note, however, that these are just a few of many, many concerns that community members have. We share them with you to illustrate the compelling need for both the creation of an independent, transparent investigation and for a genuine commitment to serve all the residents of Charlottesville in a just manner.

The City Failed to Protect Low-Income Housing Residents.

We wrote to you after the July 8 KKK rally to express our concerns about what we perceived as an inappropriate response by law enforcement towards community members who came out to voice their opposition to the Klan's hateful message. Our letter asked that in advance of August 12, the City set up an advisory committee that would include community members who could participate in the planning to keep protestors and counter-protestors safe. However, no such committee was formed, and community members were essentially left out of planning for the lead up to the "rally" on August 12.

Unfortunately, once again on August 11 and 12, law enforcement failed to appropriately calibrate its response to the presence of hate groups in the City at the expense of our client community. Over and over again, community members were viciously attacked by members of the "Alt-Right" without any intervention from law enforcement. Chemical agents were again deployed on counter-protesters *after* the white supremacists departed. Community members are left to wonder why law enforcement failed to protect them in these instances. In addition to the stories community members shared last night, much has been written in the press about the police's lack of response to violence by the Alt-Right. See for example, <https://newrepublic.com/article/144365/cops-dropped-ball-charlottesville;> [https://rewire.news/article/2017/08/21/charlottesville-police-nothing/.](https://rewire.news/article/2017/08/21/charlottesville-police-nothing/)

As just one example, on the afternoon of Saturday, August 12, 2017, a group of armed white “Alt-Right” rallygoers descended upon Friendship Court. As you know, Friendship Court is an apartment complex whose residents are overwhelmingly people of color. There was no law enforcement present to protect the community. The sight of Nazis, Alt-Right, and other terrorists brandishing weapons and wearing symbols of hate and genocide horrified the residents – particularly those families with children. Luckily, community members and residents were nearby and successfully got the Alt-Right group to leave. However, residents were left shaken, knowing that it could have been far uglier. With no law enforcement anywhere to be seen, anything could have happened.

Notably, PHAR warned the City about such issues. PHAR’s lead organizer, Brandon Collins, emailed City Council Members on August 2, 2017, urging them “to consider parking strategies that will decrease the likelihood of Alt-Right/resident contact during the weekend.” Specifically, he asked that the City implement restrictions that would keep violent extremists away from residents. Mr. Collins received only one response, which merely thanked him. On August 5, Tami Wright, a leader of the Residents Association and PHAR organizer, spoke with Councilmember Galvin, and asked Council to better plan for parking near Friendship Court to protect residents. Mr. Collins wrote again to Council on August 10, this time warning in no uncertain terms that “violent armed racists” would be at large throughout Charlottesville and pleaded that the City take steps to protect residents, particularly PHAR members who were likely to be targets of the Alt-Right. He received no response. The Friendship Court incident may have occurred because Alt-Right members parked their cars near the apartment complex; this is exactly the type of incident the City could have avoided had it heeded our call to involve community members in the advance planning before August 12.

Members of PHAR and its advisory council personally witnessed many incidents of violence where law enforcement stood idly by (sometimes only a few feet away, behind double barricades) and refused to intervene. Numerous injuries and assaults could have been prevented by the police throughout the weekend – there were certainly enough present – had those law enforcement officials been instructed to protect people and intervene in the attacks.

Many questions need to be asked and answered by City officials in the wake of this experience. Specifically:

1. Did the City order law enforcement, including the Virginia State Police and National Guard, to stand down in the face of violence? Did someone else issue such an order? If no order was given, why did law enforcement officers stand down?
2. What contingency plans did the city prepare prior to this weekend’s events in relation to protecting the families in subsidized housing properties in the City?
3. What safety plans were created related to the weekend of August 12 to protect the most vulnerable members of our community?

PHAR residents should have been the City's first priority for protection, but appear to have been completely overlooked as law enforcement planned its response to the presence of the "Alt-Right" groups on August 12. We are thankful that the Housing Authority took the risks more seriously and hired additional security officers to protect residents.

The City Failed to Communicate Effectively with Low-Income Residents.

PHAR is also deeply concerned about the poor communication from the City about the danger posed by the Alt-Right groups. The City waited until Saturday to reach out to public housing leaders about the imminent danger that the white supremacists posed to the public housing community; that was simply too late.

PHAR Board members knew about the impending attack on the city primarily through community leaders and anti-racist organizers, but City officials were absent from that preparation. It was not until the morning of Saturday, August 12 that Chief Thomas spoke with two PHAR Board members and explained how grave the danger was coming into the city, and told them that that danger was particularly acute for low-income people of color. By then, it was too late to get the word out to all residents. Many residents lack internet and some may lack phone access in their homes; thus, it is essential to plan other means of communicating with residents both before and during emergency situations.

On August 12, 2017, rumors spread about various actions by the City and the state. PHAR members were told that the Governor declared a state of emergency – but residents were not told what that meant. There was simply no communication with regard to the implications of such a declaration. Several PHAR members were told after the fact that there had been a curfew declared, but residents were not told what the declaration of the curfew meant. One PHAR member was trapped at her workplace late in the evening because taxis were not running, and her employer would not let her walk with the curfew in place.

We ask that the City commit to a detailed advance plan of outreach to low-income communities, particularly in areas with public/subsidized housing, in any plan for future events of this nature. Moreover, the City must set up a better system of communication with residents in times of emergency.

The City Must Act More Decisively to Demonstrate Their Opposition to White Supremacy.

The City's decisions with regard to policing on July 8 and August 12 reinforce a message that PHAR residents have heard all too long. These decisions amplify the feeling that communities of color are not welcome in Charlottesville. What we saw last weekend was a blatant show of racism in the streets, but after the protesters left, racism in Charlottesville's policies and institutions remained. PHAR calls upon this City to stamp out these insidious forms of racism that exist in our housing, education, and economic institutions. The full scope of those concerns is beyond the reach of one letter, but our profound hope is that an open dialogue that deeply welcomes the voices of low-income residents will help create a more just community.

The City can show Charlottesville residents that they truly oppose Nazis, white supremacy and terrorism against communities of color by committing to invest in and protect its residents. This does not stop at appropriate policing when terrorists come to town. This means eliminating disproportionate contact with the police for low income people of color in Charlottesville, including public housing residents. **This means committing to a more ambitious vision for affordable housing for very low-income families in the City of Charlottesville, particularly in the Strategic Investment Area.** This means not passing a Form Based Code *unless* the code includes visionary protections and expansions of affordable housing for families with annual incomes below \$30,000.00. This also means significantly increasing investment in the creation of additional affordable housing for extremely low-income people.

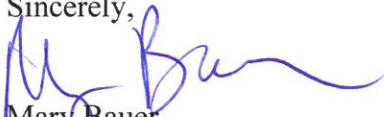
This means investing in employment opportunities, educational opportunities, and cultural spaces for low-income communities in Charlottesville. Opposing racism means real action, such as acknowledging that the rapid demographic change in Charlottesville is linked to high rents, inadequate affordable housing stock, and limited economic and educational opportunity for low-income communities – all of which is exacerbated by aggressive development that does not take into account the needs of the current residents.

Conclusion

We ask the city to: conduct an independent, thorough and transparent investigation of law enforcement conduct related to the events of July 8 and August 12 through a process that includes robust input from the low-income community, including public housing residents; improve its emergency planning so that it protects **all** Charlottesville residents, including PHAR members and other low-wealth people; and take concrete steps to eradicate institutional racism in our community by significantly improving the lives of low-income people.

If you have questions or concerns, you may reach me directly at 434-529-1823 or by email at mary@justice4all.org. Thank you in advance for your attention in this matter.

Sincerely,



Mary Bauer
Executive Director