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# OPINION

## Fight for Better Policing and Greater Accountability

### How many more will we mourn?

BY CORNELL WILLIAM BROOKS

Freddie Gray wasn't the only person to die at the hands of the police in April. Before Mr. Gray suffered three broken vertebrae during the course of his arrest by Baltimore police, 17-year-old Justus Howell was fatally shot by an unidentified officer in Zion, Ill. Like the death of Mr. Gray, Mr. Howell's death was ruled a homicide.

On the day that Mr. Gray was laid to rest and protests and demonstrations against police brutality rung out in Baltimore, a group of local and federal law enforcement officers arrived at the home of 20-year-old Terrance Kellom, who was a suspect in a robbery case. Less than 10 minutes after police entered Terrance Kellom's home, he was dead, shot several times by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer who was part of an inter-agency fugitive task force for reasons that remain unclear.

Then there was 37-year-old Natasha Mckenna. This 130-pound



woman died after she was tasered shocked four times by the Fairfax, Va. police Feb. 3, with her hands cuffed behind her back, shackled around her legs, with a hobble strap connecting both of the restraints. Police say they are still investigating.

More than 400 people have died while in police custody this year and the list keeps growing, according to an online database that compiles news reports of instances of use of deadly force. While there is no comprehensive national database compiled by law enforcement agencies of police's use of excessive or deadly force in the United States, the number of people both severely and fatally injured while in police custody underscores a distressing symptom of the untested and overaggressive policing culture that has become commonplace in communities of color all across the country.

How many more lives of unarmed black men and women, tragically and senselessly killed by police, will our nation have to mourn before our country moves to fix its unjust and ineffective

criminal justice system?

The NAACP says no more.

The fight for better policing and greater accountability has been at the forefront of the NAACP's work since its inception, and it's a fight that we know how to win. One of our most recent achievements: The NAACP alongside its valiant coalition partners helping to dismantle the practice of stop and frisk in New York and leveraging a successful collaborative campaign to pass anti-racial profiling and police accountability measures. And we have no intention of slowing down.

Now the NAACP is doubling down on advocating for body worn cameras, car cameras and gun and taser cameras. The availability of video evidence of police interactions with civilians can lead to significant improvements in police accountability and trust among a community. Additionally, we must deploy the use of independent investigation bodies and the use of civilian review boards. But we cannot do it alone. Join us in our fight. Here are three simple ways that you can help.

Join the NAACP: Become a part of the largest civil rights organization in the nation. When

you become a member of the NAACP, you are doing more than joining an organization; you are becoming a part of a community. Our membership community is the reason we've been able to protect, defend, and fight for our civil rights and human rights for over a century.

Help us pass the End Racial Profiling Act: The End Racial Profiling Act has been re-introduced in both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. The End Racial Profiling Act comprehensively addresses the insidious practice of biased treatment by law enforcement because of who you are, or who you are perceived to be, by law enforcement. Call your U.S. senators and representative in Washington and tell them to pass the End Racial Profiling Act. The switchboard phone number is 1-202-224-3121.

Support America's Journey for Justice: Last year, our "Journey for Justice" campaign began with a 134-mile, 7-day march from Ferguson to Jefferson City, Mo., to join members of the Ferguson community in protesting the death of Michael Brown at the hands of the police, and to provide leader-

ship to the predominantly young activists, participants in democracy. This year, we are continuing our work with America's Journey for Justice - a trek along the 850-mile route from Selma, Ala., to Washington, DC - through Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia - to highlight the need for criminal justice and voting reforms because our lives matter and our children deserve to live.

Every American deserves the opportunity to grow and thrive and reach their full potential. And every American child has the potential to become our nation's leading scientists, entrepreneurs, scholars, lawmakers and law enforcement officials. It is us who must protect them. The NAACP remains committed to this promise - fighting to ensure that communities of color, our children especially, are judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin in the eyes of the law. For 106 years, this is what we have stood for and we will not waver.

*Cornell William Brooks is president and chief executive officer of the Baltimore-based NAACP.*

## Nebraska Executes its Death Penalty

### An admission the system is broken

BY MARC H. MORIAL

The last time the state of Nebraska carried out an execution was Dec. 2, 1997. The inmate, Robert E. Williams, was put to death by electric chair.

In a stunning vote last month—a vote that may signal a growing, national discontent with capital punishment as a feature of our nation's criminal justice system—Nebraska became the first Republican-led state in more than four decades to abolish its death penalty.

A bipartisan group of state lawmakers—the majority of them Republicans—voted to strike down Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts' veto of a bill to repeal Nebraska's death penalty—a bill that has been introduced in the legislature every session since 1981.

For those lawmakers, and for all those in favor of re-examining



capital punishment or repealing it all together, the landmark vote was not only a stinging indictment of the practice, but an admission that the system that determines who will or will not be put to state-sponsored death in our nation is fundamentally broken.

While a large majority of Americans continue to support the death penalty, that support has steadily declined to almost historic lows. A recent Gallup poll reported that 56 percent of Americans now support the death penalty, this from a high of almost 80 percent in the mid-90s. Meanwhile, opposition to the death penalty has increased from a low of 18 percent of Americans in favor of abolishing the death penalty to 38 percent.

For hundreds of years, outspoken opposition to the death penalty, by a diverse collection of individuals and organizations, has put a spotlight on a method of punishment many feel neither align with their personal values, nor the values of this country.

There are many experts who contribute much of today's sea-

change in attitudes towards capital punishment to the growing number of conservatives coming to the frontlines of the opposition movement to the death penalty, questioning its efficacy and fiscal soundness.

After Nebraska's vote, Marc Hyden of Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty released a statement saying he was not surprised that conservatives led the death penalty repeal effort in Nebraska and predicted conservative opposition would become more commonplace in the future. He also noted that, for conservatives, the death penalty violated "the core conservative principles of fiscal responsibility, limited government, and valuing life."

But even more has changed since the politics of capital punishment began to shift. As of this writing, 153 men and women have been exonerated from America's death rows. In April of this year, Willie Manning became the 153rd person added to the Death Penalty Information Center's Innocence List—the charges against him were dismissed after spending 19

years incarcerated for crimes he did not commit.

When cases are revisited, or defendants are finally given proper representation in court, a different story can sometimes emerge, one that questions our criminal justice system and its ability to judge all Americans in a fair and equitable manner.

For far too long, we have been challenged with proof of racial discrimination in arrests and sentencing, and we have also seen DNA

evidence prove the innocence of those once deemed guilty. These problems and disparities should give every American reason for pause. No matter where you may stand on the death penalty debate, where is the value in maintaining a system that could likely execute an innocent man or woman?

As long as questions of equity, fairness and fallibility persist, we must stop executions and give death row inmates every chance to prove their innocence.

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