



July 19, 2016

**The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Offers Our Condolences and Grieves with the Families of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Police Officers Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Brent Thompson, and Patrick Zamarripa**

Washington, DC -- The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights offers our condolences and grieves with the families of Alton Sterling,<sup>1</sup> Philando Castile,<sup>2</sup> and police officers Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Brent Thompson, and Patrick Zamarripa.<sup>3</sup>

We are at a crossroads in America when it comes to relationships between police officers and the communities they serve. Over the last two years, we have seen an increase in the number of fatal shootings of people of color by police.<sup>4</sup> Both videos of various instances of these shootings as they occurred or their aftermath and the subsequent peaceful protests — often led by the Black Lives Matter Movement — have brought recent deaths to the forefront of America's consciousness.

America witnessed, via video, police officers fatally shoot Alton Sterling outside of a store in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Philando Castile's fiancée record and narrate the aftermath of Mr. Castile's fatal shooting by police officers in Falcon Heights, Minnesota; and the ambush of twelve police officers — five of whom were fatally shot — as they dutifully secured a peaceful protest in Dallas, Texas this month.

It is important to recognize that the vast majority of police officers serve and protect their communities effectively, professionally and justly. However, like in any profession, a small minority of officers are unable to function at the standard necessary to warrant their use of the authority under color of law to use force sanctioned by the government to enforce the rule of law.

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Capatides, *From Alton Sterling to Philando Castile, to Cops Shot Dead in Dallas*, CBS News, July 8, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/from-alton-sterling-and-philando-castile-to-cops-shot-dead-in-dallas/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Capatides, *supra* note 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Fatal Force: More Than 250 People Have Been Fatally Shot by Police Officers in the First Three Months of 2016*, The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/pb/policeshootings/> (noting there have been 27 more fatal shootings this year than at the same time last year).

While we understand the great the outrage at these civilian deaths, there is no excuse for taking the lives of police officers and members of law enforcement as was done in Dallas, and previously in New York.

As President Obama said, “To admit we’ve got a serious problem in no way contradicts our respect and appreciation for the vast majority of police officers who put their lives on the line to protect us every single day. It is to say that, as a nation, we can and must do better to institute the best practices that reduce the appearance or reality of racial bias in law enforcement.”<sup>5</sup>

The Commission has long stood for justice for all Americans and more recently has engaged the issue of police use of deadly force. In 2014, the Commission urged then-Attorney General Eric Holder to take bold action to protect the civil rights of the citizens of Ferguson, Missouri following the death of Michael Brown.<sup>6</sup> In 2015, the Commission conducted a field briefing in New York City to look into policing practices and use of deadly force throughout the U.S.<sup>7</sup> Our Missouri State Advisory Committee recently issued a report titled, *The Impact of Community/Police Interactions on Individual Civil Rights in Missouri*.<sup>8</sup> The Commission expects to present its national report to the President and Congress in the coming months.

We believe that now is the time for us all to work diligently to address this problem. All sides of the issue must stop raising the volume of their arguments. Instead, we must acknowledge the historical context that has led to the perceptions and stereotypes that law enforcement and people of color have of each other and change them. It is important to value, respect and hear what every person has to contribute to the resolution of these issues.

To that end, we strongly support the United States Department of Justice’s (“DOJ”) investigation into the shooting death of Alton Sterling. We urge the DOJ to initiate an investigation into the shooting death of Philando Castile. We ask citizens to read the President’s task force’s recommendations and become involved in implementing the community-aspects of the recommendations.<sup>9</sup> But most importantly, we implore law enforcement agencies, foundations, local, state and federal legislators and agencies to implement the task force recommendations expeditiously.

Commission Chair Martin R. Castro stated, “We mourn the loss of lives that occurred in Dallas, Baton Rouge and Falcon Heights. And as we do so, we remember also the lives lost in New York, Chicago, Pasco, Ferguson and elsewhere. This time, let us do more than mourn the

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<sup>5</sup> *President Obama on the Fatal Shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile*, July 7, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2016/07/07/president-obama-fatal-shootings-alton-sterling-and-philando-castile>.

<sup>6</sup> *Letter to Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr.*, United States Commission on Civil Rights, Aug. 15, 2014, [http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/Holder\\_letter.pdf](http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/Holder_letter.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> *Examining Police Practices and Use of Force*, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Briefing Transcript, April 20, 2015, [http://www.usccr.gov/calendar/trnscript/CommissionBriefingTranscript\\_04-20-2015\\_Final.pdf](http://www.usccr.gov/calendar/trnscript/CommissionBriefingTranscript_04-20-2015_Final.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> The Missouri Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Impact of Community/Police Interactions on Individual Civil Rights in Missouri*, June 2016, [http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/MOPoliceRelationsReport\\_Publish.pdf](http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/MOPoliceRelationsReport_Publish.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, May 2015, [http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce\\_FinalReport.pdf](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce_FinalReport.pdf).

losses, let us take concrete and constructive steps as a nation to finally end this cycle of violence.”

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