



## **NASW-NYC Position Statement: The Trauma and Burden of Racism**

June 1st, 2020

***“If you have come to help me you are wasting your time.  
But if you recognize that your liberation and mine  
are bound up together, we can walk together.”***

– Lila Watson

I sincerely hope this message finds you as well as can be under the circumstances and uncertainty of these times. While we, like you, and the rest of world, have been rightfully focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health, lives, and economic stability of the millions impacted, we can't ignore the deeply rooted injustices, racial disparities, and xenophobic rhetoric that continues to threaten the lives of many in America.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has been clear in our position of promoting social justice and equity since our inception 65 years ago. In my tenure as Executive Director for NASW-NYC, I've written statements aligned with our social work values to speak out against injustices such as racism, white supremacy, attacks on reproductive justice rights, and senseless hate crimes. While I personally love the NASW Code of Ethics and it's thoughtfulness and charge that we be accountable to provide the highest level of care, respect, and compassion to those we serve, I'm honestly tired of writing these types of statements. I'm tired of calling on the Code of Ethics to highlight what this profession means. I'm tired of reminding the world that human lives, and the human condition matter- no questions asked. I'm tired of sharing the importance of respecting others despite what we may perceive to be differences of opinions and beliefs. Yet, I find myself writing again about the ongoing threat and assault on human lives, and more specifically, the lives of Black and Brown people that are so often deemed worthless due to the deeply rooted racism and structural violence inherent in our society.

I am profoundly aware of the many intersections I carry - woman, person of color, immigrant, and so on. Consequently, this message, like all of the others I've written about social injustices and structural violence, is deeply personal. As a trained social worker with many years of experience, I found myself struggling for words as I grappled with and continued to process the impact of COVID-19 in my personal and professional life. I am at a loss because in my personal grief, I simultaneously grieve for the countless lives lost during this pandemic.

I have an acute awareness that most of those at risk, severely impacted, and with less access to quality health care and testing most often look like me. I maintain this painful awareness while bearing witness to the ongoing attacks, murder, and dehumanization of people of color in America (and around the world). It pains me more than I can convey to write yet another statement addressing the fact that violence of any kind is unacceptable and that NASW-NYC strongly condemns these acts of violence, as well as the systems of power that maintain them. It hurts beyond comprehension to attempt to articulate my thoughts on the seemingly permissible daily assault against Black and Brown bodies in America.

The past few weeks of events and mounting violence against people of color in NYC and across the country have reduced me to tears. I am exhausted because the ongoing silence of many, as well as the violence and palpable grief has also left me numb - my mind, body, and soul literally can't hold any more pain. As social workers and as humans, we should be deeply impacted by the ongoing assaults on Blackness and the compounded generational trauma that has ensued. We should question practices and biases when we learn as we did in March 2020; that over 93% of the COVID-19 arrests and summons issued by NYPD involved people of color. This should make us all stop, think, and raise our collective voices questioning these stats and practices.

We should care that for so many, trust in healthcare, justice, and social systems is lacking because of ongoing inequalities and abuses against people of color seeking 'help' or caught in these systems. We should ask ourselves why we somehow find the statement **Black Lives Matter** (BLM) offensive, often responding that "all lives matter". The glossing over and erasure of the importance of the BLM movement is racist, oppressive, harmful, and invalidating. The fact remains that the very reason this movement was created was because our society, and the ongoing violence against Black people necessitated the declaration that BLACK lives DO INDEED matter! As social workers, we should probe deeper to ask why we argue about the value of BLM both within and outside of social work circles. Should we not acknowledge that this movement, like our profession, rests on the empowerment of oppressed groups? Should we not educate ourselves and others that this movement formed because the assaults on Blackness in this country are a constant reminder to many that the rights, liberties, and freedoms espoused in the constitution were not, and perhaps still not, intended for Black and Brown communities? **Black Lives Matter** highlights that the repeated divestment and overlooking of inequalities in communities of color is killing Black and Brown people at alarming rates. The declaration that Black Lives Matter never erased the importance of every life. The declaration that BLM remains a bold assertion and challenge in the face of abuse and systemically approved oppression. It says that while Black people have been dehumanized for so long, they too, like 'all' others, are deserving of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It says that **until** the concept that ALL lives Matter systematically **includes** Black people, it is necessary to remind the world that Black and Brown people are human too. Finally, WE should be disturbed, unable to sleep, and moved to action, because we understand and recognize that personal silence, denial of racism and structural violence, tokenism, refusal to name white privilege, community divestment, opportunistic activism, mass incarceration, Eurocentric education and health care, as well as so called *color blindness* are all part of the problem called white supremacy.

- Mr. George Floyd of Minneapolis, MN died while in police custody. A police officer pressed his knee into Mr. Floyd's neck for several minutes and he succumbed to asphyxiation. His pleas of 'I can't breathe' were eerily reminiscent of Mr. Eric Garner in Staten Island, NY who died in 2014 after being placed in a choke hold by police.

- Mr. Ahmaud Arbery of Georgia was murdered in February after being gunned down while jogging in a neighborhood. His killers were a former police officer and his son. The case wasn't public until two months later in what appears to be a cover-up.
- Ms. Breonna Taylor a 26 year old EMT from Louisville, KY was shot 8 times and killed by police in her home. Ms. Taylor had just gotten off a shift and was sleeping when police raided her home while executing a search warrant at the wrong address.
- A woman in Miami killed her 9-year old son and initially told police that two Black men accosted her and abducted them.
- Mr. Christian Cooper, an African American man in NYC, had the cops called on him while bird watching in Central Park, after asking a woman to leash her dog. During that exchange, the woman stated to him that she would call the police and tell them that an African American man was threatening her life. She indeed called and pretended to be in distress while she reported that Mr. Cooper, who based in the video was seemingly several feet away from her recording their interaction, was threatening her. Thankfully, Mr. Cooper didn't die and no arrest was made. The questions remain however, why wasn't she held accountable for calling in a false police report and potentially risking someone's life? Why are the words, Black + Man synonymous with the word **threat** when calling the police? Why did she feel empowered to call 911 and report a non-existent threat when she was seemingly the aggressor? Is it because our society has taught us that to be Black in America means that your life has little value and systemically, even with proof of your innocence, you will not be believed and many will not be held accountable for threatening or taking your life?

These are the conditions that people of color live in every day - high anxiety and stress with an acute awareness of the conditions that foster constant threats to life and freedom. This is the burden and danger of non-white skin. This burden may very well be the mother of generational anxiety, depression, hyper-tension, and distrust in systems that plague communities of color. The burden of racism for non-white people is why it is necessary for social workers to do more to address systemic violence, murder, and attacks on people of color.

The preamble of the NASW Code of Ethics says that "the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are "vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty". Using this as a guide, I then assert that to be a social worker, a true social worker, means consistently working to sit in your individual discomfort and reflect on the ways WE contribute to systems of help or harm. It means regardless of personal beliefs, upbringing, race, culture, or politics, WE stand up to injustices perpetuated by ourselves, our families, and our society. It means acknowledging what is happening is a matter of human rights. Our Code of Ethics speaks to the necessity of doing this inner self-work and then moving outwardly towards advocacy. Only in doing so can we stand firmly upon the foundation of who we are and should be as a profession. Only by actively participating in this lifelong work can we say that we live by and embody the values of the social work profession. To be a social worker is not just holding the degree or title, it is a way of life. Are you a social worker? We call you to be. WE call on you to not only raise your voice publicly, but to do so privately even if uncomfortable. We call on you to radically

believe, stand, advocate, and act in solidarity with those impacted. WE call on you to support and raise your voices with *NASW-NYC*, and the many organizations working to root out and address racism, oppression, and violence in America.

Only then can we all be liberated and walk hand in hand towards justice.

With love, appreciation, and in deep solidarity

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Claire Green-Forde". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Claire Green-Forde, LCSW  
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NASW-NYC