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AFT-Maryland Statement on the Deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd

The past week and a half has been perhaps the most challenging time for the United States in the 21st century. The high profile deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd (two of which we witnessed the heartbreaking video) has awakened a deep sense of unequal treatment of Black Americans by police and white vigilantes. This has led to protests and rebellions across the country where a number of police departments have responded brutally to journalists and protesters ironically protesting police brutality.

The wake of this has brought on rebellions and uprisings reminiscent of the long hot summer of 1968. Many historians direct our attention to the race riots of 1919 as a more apt comparison. Locally, we don't even have to go that far back. We vividly remember the 2015 uprisings in response to the death of Freddie Gray in police custody. Unequal treatment of Black people by law enforcement is abhorrent and must end if this nation is to live up to the full promise of its words. Dr. King reminds us that "a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?"

Dr. King's words can also serve as a beacon of hope as he noted, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The hopeful and encouraging evidence of the bend toward justice is the broad coalition of Americans from different walks of life taking to streets across the country to say that Black Lives Matter. The streets aren't filled with just the young or the Black, but a wide cross-section of Americans from different faith traditions, ethnicities, professions, and races all demanding better treatment for their fellow citizens and a better country to leave to our children.

Any effort to effect change in a democratic society starts with agitation and continues with the electoral process. Yesterday, Maryland held elections and the long lines of Marylanders who waited to cast their vote showed that many of us recognize change doesn't solely come from street protests, but must be married to the ballot. Yesterday's election was so important because many of the laws that govern police interaction with citizens are determined at the state and local levels. Despite the global pandemic, it was encouraging to see the long lines (despite the inconsistent social distancing) of people casting their ballots.

To some, this moment in our country and state may be one of despair. Rather than wallow in hopelessness, let's look to the broad community of support for George Floyd in our country and across the world. Let us be encouraged when we see police kneeling with protesters, let us be motivated when we see predominantly white crowds chanting Black Lives Matter because that tells us that our future is bright. It tells us that we are beginning to believe and live the idea that we are connected through one unbreakable bond of fellowship. It shows us that we recognize an injustice to one of us is an injustice to all of us and that none of us can say our lives matter if our nation doesn't recognize and acknowledge that Black Lives Matter.

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