



NAACP
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Public Statement

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The NAACP, New England Area Conference, consisting of 34 Branches and Youth Units in the states of Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont conducted its 82nd Annual Meeting, October 23rd- 25th. At the Annual Meeting and after due consideration, the resolution below was unanimously adopted.

RESOLUTION FOR POLICING JUSTICE IN SPRINGFIELD, MA

While there is never a time or situation when injustice in any form should be tolerated, it is especially egregious at this critical period of racial unrest in our country that Bishop Talbert W. Swan, President of the NAACP, Greater Springfield Branch, was terminated recently from his position as Chaplain of the Springfield Police Department. Such action drips of direct and repugnant retaliation for Bishop Swan's call for meaningful reform within the Springfield Police Department which was reflected in a recently released, scathing Department of Justice report. Bishop Swan rightfully advocated for needed change that would address problems of apathy, corruption, and the excessive use of force within Springfield Police Department, with the aim to improve the quality of service and to work towards restoring public confidence. In turn, he was rebuked by a system that is blinded by its own need to maintain control while ignoring the unconscionable civil rights abuses of many, and in particular Blacks and other people of color. What is so idiotic about the termination is that it is a volunteer position. Bishop Swan agreed to accept the position years ago to assist the police department in its primary role – to protect and serve.

Bishop Swan clearly has legal claims stemming from the police department's retaliatory termination. A significant element of strength for these legal claims exist because of the severity

of the civil rights harm related to the timing of the termination. The civil rights harm is two-fold: first, the action against Bishop Swan for exercising his freedom of conscience by using his legal right to freedom of expression guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, and second, the effective action against the community. His termination signals to communities of color that the police are willing to use unlawful measures to maintain power and control over the narrative around policing, and over the populace itself through the very kinds of behaviors that Bishop Swan is advocating for curtailment of unlawful and unscrupulous policing policies and practices. Such policies and practices include the use of excessive force, escalation of encounters with civilians, and routinely providing misleading or false arrest reports to cover up misconduct – all facts about the Springfield Police Department revealed by the U.S. Department of Justice’s July 8, 2020 report, and which produced in Springfield what the Boston Globe has called a “reign of brutality.” Both Bishop Swan and the Springfield community will now suffer the negative consequences of the suppression of his speech on the issues of badly-needed police reform in Springfield should the termination remain effective.

When our U.S. Congress drafted and passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, it recognized that false justifications would always be asserted when the underlying reason of government action was to suppress a constitutional right. That is why it created Section 1983, to allow civil penalties for suppression of rights by government actors – like the police commissioner here – when she terminated Bishop Swan and more broadly, acted against the interests of Springfield citizens “under color of law.” The suppression of freedom of expression is a harm that has long beset Black Americans, and it has been perpetrated again, right here in Massachusetts, in 2020. The police department has asserted that it had a legitimate reason for this termination, as have many government actors before it.

We, the New England Area Conference of the NAACP, vigorously object and call this incident what it is: a retaliatory firing intended to suppress Bishop Swan’s speech on the subject of policing and police reform, and to signal the power of the police to chill such speech by others in Springfield.

The New England Area Conference leadership, in support of the Springfield Branch, will be pleased to join the Branch to resolve the termination issue and to advance a meaningful discussion of policing reform and greater accountability, intended to redirect the police department toward its goal - to protect and serve the citizens of Springfield. We find this a preferable approach to ensure that justice is served.

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