

July 16, 2020

Delivered by Email

Mayor Joseph Petty
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City of Worcester
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Chief Steven Sargent
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Dear Mayor Petty and Chief Sargent:

On the evening of June 4, 2020, Ms. Latoya Lewis, a Black woman, and her three minor children suffered a verbal and physical attack by a white male gas attendant at a Sunoco gas station attached to Pat's Towing, located at 5 Shrewsbury Street in Worcester. The attendant's expletives were racial in nature, referring to Ms. Lewis and her 13-year-old daughter as "Black cunts," and then insisting that she, a Black woman, would not receive future service from the gas station. This racist and hateful behavior escalated after Ms. Lewis notified the full-service gas attendant that he had allowed the gas tank to overflow. The gas attendant became violent: he physically kicked and hit Ms. Lewis's car causing substantial damage and terrifying her children. Through this racialized violence, the gas attendant threatened and intimidated Ms. Lewis.

At Lawyers for Civil Rights ("LCR"), we are committed to marshalling the resources of the legal community to address racial discrimination. Recent events and the nationwide cry for racial justice makes clear that violent and hateful altercations are not isolated incidents and that no community is immune. In fact, I understand that community members have already gathered in a nonviolent protest to show support for Ms. Lewis and others who are subjected to discrimination.

Regarding the incident on June 4, I understand that Ms. Lewis immediately contacted the Worcester Police Department ("WPD") after the altercation and was informed by an officer that the WPD could only offer to take a mere report by phone. WPD simply encouraged Ms. Lewis to file an insurance claim. Ms. Lewis did not receive additional

assistance from the WPD until a board member from the Worcester Human Rights Commission contacted the WPD on her behalf. Even then, the WPD has failed to take any meaningful steps to investigate the hate crime. The WPD has also discouraged Ms. Lewis from pursuing formal charges against the assailant.

It is difficult to comprehend how heinous a crime must be before the WPD takes serious action, particularly when said crime is based on the race and gender of the victims and involves minor children. Immediate responses to such heinous and terrorizing acts from the legal, social and political community are critical to deter future racial incidents and to build trust between law enforcement and communities of color. We urge you to take immediate action to reinforce the critical message that hate incidents and crimes are not only unacceptable, but illegal. See 18 U.S.C. §249 (2009); G.L. c.22, §32; G.L. c.265, §37, §39; *Commonwealth v. Barnett*, 45 Mass. App. Ct. 486 (1998). The failure to investigate hate crimes—and to protect residents of color—is tantamount to discrimination and raises the specter of liability under federal and state constitutional law.

LCR urges Worcester to forcefully and publicly condemn these actions and to conduct a full-scale investigation of this hate crime. We stand ready to assist the WPD.

Sincerely,

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