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## **Atlanta Citizen Oversight Board Executive Director Responds to Missouri Shooting**

### **OP- Editorial**

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### **City of Atlanta Independent Oversight Agency created in 2007 to Investigate Allegations of Police Misconduct Speaks Out on the Current Unrest in Ferguson and What Atlanta and Other Urban Cities Can Learn**

ATLANTA – When good people fail to act, bad things continue to happen. When good people close their eyes and mouths, officers can ignore misconduct, supervisors can fail to properly supervise officers, and elected officials can ignore the cries of the community.

Rarely do things happen in a vacuum, the initial causes of newsworthy stories are usually a result of small actions ignored or explained away that become national topics of discussion. The recent news of citizens being killed by police officers is bringing the simmering bubbles of long dissatisfaction with police treatment to the surface to pop into explosions of rage. The death of innocent people by law enforcement is not a new phenomenon. Many communities have dealt with this for years... from Missouri to Detroit, from California to New York, and from our home state Georgia where just four months ago, a baby was badly burned when a police flash grenade blew up in its crib.

The feelings witnessed on the news are not far from us. Not long ago, in 2006, Atlanta Police Officers killed 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston during an illegal raid. We have seen the community anger...the rage...and the distrust.

In response to the Kathryn Johnston incident, the good people of Atlanta created the Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB) to allow for external investigations, and the police department made changes to procedures. But have we done enough? Are we ready for the next tragedy?

We, right now, at this very moment, have the opportunity to place ourselves in a better position for when an unfortunate incident occurs. We must seize the time. Now is the time for good people to engage in the conversation of prevention and community reconciliation. We can be ahead of the riots, the marches, the

miscommunication, and the pain. We all must be proactive, before being forced to react. We must not wait for the next tragedy to renew the conversation with our young black males about interacting with police.

The police have a job to perform, and we have given them the power and authority to perform the job. Many officers do the right things at the right times; however, it is only when tragedy strikes that we tend to seriously look at their fitness for duty, quality of training, and level of supervision. Only then do we call for stronger officer accountability.

One of our best options to correcting the course of officer misconduct is empowering and supporting officers to report misconduct. A few years ago, the street credo “don’t snitch” was quite popular, but it has always been a code of the street and police departments, remember...“the blue wall of silence.” However, silence is not just a problem that allows criminals to lurk and bad officers to hide; it is an issue that is rooted in the community as well. We allow our silence to speak when we believe that making a misconduct complaint is useless, fear retaliation for filing a complaint, or believe that our complaint is too small to make a difference. It is then that we allow bad things to continue happen.

We are all in this together. What we need are proactive approaches to the issue. Running to the fire with a bucket when the building is burning is too late; we have to put away the fire hazards before the fire. We need to talk now and continue to talk while people are listening and trust can be earned.

There is no “us” against “them.” The core of our great city and the core of the officers we pay to protect us understand that we need each other. In that vein, citizens must become empowered to handle interactions with the police in a manner that increases their safety. Citizens must know that they have a right to file a complaint. They have a right to receive a resolution to their complaint. “Our officers must,” as a former Atlanta police major has said repeatedly, “understand that a badge and a gun is not a symbol of power, but a symbol of trust that reflects on all other officers.”

So what can we do to prepare during this time when other cities are in the middle of chaos?

We have to take advantage of trainings centered on proper interactions with police officers offered by agencies and organizations. We have to learn to be good witnesses to police action. We have to learn to report questionable officer activity and hold leaders accountable. We must bring our concerns forward and follow through. As a community, we must be just as committed to our demands for justice, respect, and safety, as we are committed to reducing crime.

We have to continue to support each other in these challenging times. We have to acknowledge that the status, class, or race of a person is no excuse for an abuse of a person’s rights.

We can avoid seeing Atlanta on the national news for the shooting of an unarmed citizen, but we need to keep our hand on the plow to ensure the community that if a tragedy occurs, our leadership will be honest, will be trustworthy, and will seek to reassure the community that there will be no sleight of hand, no trickery, and no doubletalk.

We must seize the time. Now is the time to learn, to talk, to receive feedback, and to make corrections as needed. Now is the time for good people to get involved whether you are a citizen or an officer because there is no “us” against “them.” We are all in this together. Let’s work toward a more proactive community to avoid the chaos of reacting.

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