

## **WRJ Statement: The Crisis of Racial and Structural Inequality in Law Enforcement**

**Adopted by the WRJ Executive Committee January 6, 2015**

Law enforcement officers who risk their lives each day to ensure our safety deserve the respect and appreciation of all Americans. Their work is challenging and the decisions they are forced to make are difficult. We deplore acts of violence directed against police and other law enforcement personnel, no matter what perceived injustices are being debated in the public square or attributed to police misconduct. We mourn the recent deaths of New York City police officers, Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, whose murderer invoked the names of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in his deadly rampage. We deplore the tactics of those who in protesting recent events have called for killing or assaulting police officers. Justice must be pursued through non-violent and just means if we are to reach our goals.

Yet, even as we reaffirm our respect and appreciation for law enforcement personnel, we must acknowledge the long-standing structural injustices, particularly concerning race, that impact law enforcement, impair judgment, and plague our society, including our criminal justice system.

In Deuteronomy (16:20) we are commanded, *Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof*, "Justice, justice you shall pursue." The sages explained that the word *tzedekis* repeated not only for emphasis but to teach us that in our pursuit of justice, our means must be as just as our ends. We are also guided by the words of Leviticus (19:15), "You shall do no unrighteousness in judgment; you shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor favor the person of the mighty; but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor."

The recent cases involving Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, as well as other incidents in cities across the United States involving the use of deadly force by police, dramatize ongoing challenges that must be addressed in our communities. While these cases differ, common threads run through them: economic, social, and racial disparities that deny opportunities to individuals of color and erode families and communities; the violence plaguing too many low income and communities of color; the violence faced daily by law enforcement, leading some police to view too many in communities of color with suspicion and even hostility; proper training and two procedures for police officers in de-

escalation techniques and minimizing the use of deadly force, and the disparate treatment that grand juries and prosecutors too often give to police versus civilian crime suspects.

Systemic change is needed urgently, including repairing broken relationships between minority communities and law enforcement, making greater efforts to ensure police forces reflect the communities they serve, and ensuring that racial profiling is avoided. The collection of accurate, nationwide data on police use of lethal force can help guide this work. Bearing in mind the words of Leviticus (24:22), “There shall be one law for all of you,” members of law enforcement must be accountable for their actions. Our grand jury system is in need of reform that reflects this principle. More can also be done with new technologies, such as police body cameras that provide a recording of their interactions with the public, which can help protect the interests of all parties. State, local, and municipal governments are key partners, especially working with representatives of the police, political leaders, and civil society (including the religious community), to begin the process of healing.

This kind of change must also be addressed through individual reflection and personal commitment to transforming what is wrong in America regarding race. Racism violates the core Jewish principle that all human beings are created *b'tselem Elohim*, in the Divine image (Genesis 1:27), with the attendant dignity and value inherent in every human being.

We are proud that in many communities, our Reform congregations and clergy have built coalitions and nurtured relationships allowing them to visibly and meaningfully address inequality and racism. But this work must be expanded in its scope and depth. Even as we engage with national, state, and local leaders to address these challenges, it is also time to look inward at both our institutions and ourselves and consider what we can do to fix what ails us. If we are to thrive as a nation, all people must have equality of opportunity and be able to have faith and trust in law enforcement and our judicial system. We acknowledge the resolution recently adopted by the URJ Board of Trustees and echo their call for engagement on these issues.

**Therefore, Women of Reform Judaism urges its members to:**

1. Applaud and support law enforcement agencies and personnel who work arduously and appropriately to keep our communities safe and to protect individuals and property from harm.
2. Call for a return to the basic ideals of community policing in which police officers see themselves as community members and are integrated into the neighborhood and culture of their jurisdictions. To that end, police units and command staffs should, to the greatest extent possible, reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the community they serve.
3. Support the collection of data nationally on incidents involving police use of lethal force.
4. Advocate for reforms to the grand jury process, including the appointment of a special prosecutor in cases where police conduct is at issue.
5. Recommit ourselves to advocating for an end to the use of racial profiling and to mitigating racial disparities in arrests, prosecution and sentencing by police and judicial officials at the federal, state, local, and tribal levels.
6. Advocate for technology, such as body cameras, to be used by law enforcement to record interactions with the public, and for recordings to be accessible to the public in cases of accusations of unnecessary violence in order to increase transparency and trust within the community.
7. Urge all involved in protests to avoid the use of violence.
8. Establish and sustain relationships with diverse racial, ethnic, and economic sectors of their communities, participate in community-based dialogues pertaining to race and community-police relations, and work to enhance violence prevention and conflict resolution procedures.
9. When appropriate to the size of a community and in cases of a clear, ongoing pattern of excessive police violence in general or against specific segments of the community, consider the efficacy of establishing a representative police review board with subpoena powers.