

# **OPINION: BREATHE! statement: “The Mayor’s Commission on Police Force is a Distraction!”**

“Mayor Mitchell’s Commission on police force is window dressing that is meant to pacify the good people of New Bedford. Do not be fooled; this is not the Mayor responding to Black Lives Matter calls for justice. This commission will not result in any sustainable change but instead maintain the status quo.

The new commission is limited to reviewing three policies that already exist: police use of deadly force, use of less-lethal force, and the use of electronic control weapons. Chaired by Councilman Brian Gomes, a strong supporter of illegal “Stop and Frisk” policing, the commission can only comment on these three policies. This commission has no power over disciplinary action of NBPD, it has no control over the hiring and firing of officers, and it cannot comment on any problematic policies outside the limited scope of three documents. Mitchell’s commission will not end NBPD’s history of racial profiling and police violence.

In May 2012, five months into Mayor Mitchell’s inaugural term, Malcom Gracia was murdered at the hands of New Bedford Police because of what was deemed an illegal stop by the Superior Court. This tragic loss of life was the outcome of Mayor Mitchell’s continued endorsement of a High Energy Patrol Initiative that disproportionately targets Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in our community. In the eight years that have passed, we have heard the Mayor’s claims that community/police relations have improved, but by what measure?

Citizens of New Bedford should have the power to investigate and discipline police misconduct. If Mayor Mitchell is committed to stopping police from targeting BIPOC communities, he will support the community's demand for an Independent Oversight Board with subpoena power and disciplinary authority. This oversight board would hold police officers accountable for wrongdoing. New Bedford needs an oversight board to ensure police stop their policies and practices of targeting BIPOC communities, low income people, and other marginalized groups.

The oversight board must be independent, not only from the police department, but also from elected politics, and have a fixed budget, so it is able to independently investigate complaints. The board's structure needs to be designed by the community, not the Mayor. This ensures true community voice and perspective centered around the needs of those most impacted by police violence, abuse, and misconduct. The leadership and majority of the board membership must be victims of police misconduct and/or their family members, with other local citizens nominated by grassroots civic and community organizations trusted by the communities most impacted by the criminal justice system.

Instead, the current Mayor's Commission, which has no legal authority, is heavily represented by the police and District Attorney's Office and lacks representation from victims of police violence or their families. The current commission has no ability to open an independent investigation of the murder of Malcolm Gracia or any other trauma and violence the police have inflicted on our community.

Mayor Mitchell, your community does not want to be appeased with symbolism attached to President Obama's legacy. We want change. We want to trust that our elected officials and police will carry out written policies with integrity. If the City of New Bedford had an independent review board, perhaps Malcolm Gracia would not have been racially profiled, illegally

stopped, and murdered. If there had been an independent review board, perhaps our city would have been spared from this grief. Moreover, all the officers involved in the murder of Malcolm and those involved in the cover up would have been held accountable.”

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*BREATHE! A New Bedford based grassroots movement that seeks to strategically create change in the policies and practices that have upheld institutional racism, state violence, and injustice.*