

June 4th, 2020

To: NOPD Chief Shaun Ferguson  
Mayor LaToya Cantrell  
Members of the New Orleans City Council

We are a group of healthcare professionals in the Greater New Orleans area who are expressing concern on the alarming use of tear gas against protesters by the New Orleans Police Department.

On Wednesday night, the NOPD used tear gas on protestors on the Crescent City Connection, seriously injuring at least one individual who required emergent care. Tear gas is used as an alternative to more lethal force despite it initially being developed as a tool for physical and psychological torture. Chemical irritants like tear gas are banned from use in warfare, yet we allow them to be used to cause harm on our own citizens. The use of tear gas causes injuries indiscriminately, which according to the organization Physicians for Human Rights, could be a violation of International Human Rights principles.

Those in our community who have been gathering to protest are doing so in the wake of the recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Modesto Reyes and so many other Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement. We stand with those rising up to demand change in the policies and practices that have disproportionately targeted Black communities across the US.

As healthcare professionals, we see the consequences of these discriminatory policies on the physical and emotional health of our Black patients on a daily basis. The evidence supporting this is strong enough that researchers have deemed racism as a public health crisis, linking it to the increased burden of many medical conditions in Black communities. One recent example is the impact that COVID-19 has had in terms of the number of infections and deaths seen in the Black community. As health professionals we acknowledge the increased risk of COVID-19 transmission during these protests, which have been mitigated by practices such as widespread use of masks and hand sanitizing.

However, the use of tear gas is in direct conflict with appropriate infection control measures in times of a pandemic. Its use can increase the risk of infection with COVID-19 by irritating the respiratory tract, increasing inflammation and inducing cough, thus dispersing droplets throughout the surrounding environment. To use a chemical that increases the risk of these symptoms in the midst of one of the deadliest infectious disease outbreaks in modern day history is irresponsible and could contribute to overwhelming an already overburdened healthcare system.

Given that we are still in the middle of a pandemic, it is critical for us to continue to work towards flattening the curve. With that being said, we unequivocally support protestors who gather to

exercise their right to call for change. An open letter by health care professionals across the nation provides other recommendations for harm reduction for those gathering for protests.

<https://bit.ly/PublicHealthOpenLetterSigned>

It is the responsibility of the city and the NOPD to prioritize the safety of our community members who are protesting for justice and reform. The use of aggressive techniques such as what was seen Wednesday night as a means of crowd control on individuals exercising their constitutional right to assemble is unconscionable. Escalation of aggression by law enforcement has led to deaths in other cities and could likely happen in New Orleans if these tactics continue to be used. We implore that the NOPD avoid the use of tear gas and other aggressive crowd control techniques on protestors as they struggle towards a more equitable future for Black Americans.

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Ashley Reeves, Resident Physician  
Lindsey Guidry, Resident Physician  
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Sydney Smith, Physician Assistant  
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Denise Hancock, Registered Nurse  
Akanksha Thakur, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry  
Julianna Finelli, Physician  
Corinne Vandagriff, Health Educator  
Rachel Charbonnet, Technician  
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Kyle Pearson, Case Manager  
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Blair Stevens, Resident Physician  
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