

Testimony OF

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President's Taskforce on 21st Century Policing

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My name is Linda Sarsour and I am honored to submit this testimony for the record on behalf of the National Network for Arab American Communities regarding today's listening session for the President's 21st Century Taskforce on Policing. NNAAC, which was established in 2004, currently has 23 member organizations in 11 states. Our member organizations are grassroots nonprofits located in the most highly concentrated Arab American communities in the country. Since 9/11, NNAAC has been at the forefront of public discourse, policy campaigns and grassroots organizing to address grave civil and human rights violations against Arab Americans and American Muslims. I commend President Obama on his leadership to bring the critical issue of policing to the forefront of public discourse and amongst our government representatives. We at NNAAC believe in the values our nation proclaims; inclusion, plurality, and diversity. We continue to be committed to upholding the civil and human rights of all Americans.

The Arab American and American Muslim communities continue to face one of the most hostile civic environment since 9/11. It has been thirteen years since the tragic events of 9/11. And unfortunately, Arab Americans, South Asians, Muslim Americans, and those perceived to be Muslim continue to be impacted by post 9/11 policies. Anti-Arab sentiments and Islamophobia have been on the rise and increased dramatically this past year. Hate crimes against Muslims and those perceived have rose significantly. According to the NYPD's Deputy Chief Michael Osgood, hate crimes against Muslims increased by 143%. We urge federal government and law enforcement agencies to take increased measures to prevent, address, and combat hate crimes in the United States. When one community feels unsafe, we all are unsafe. Since the tragic events of 9/11, we have witnessed a fixation by some in government with radicalization and extremism of Muslim Americans. While it

has been nearly five years since the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act was signed in 2009, strengthening existing legal protections, hate crimes and hate groups continue to be a serious threat facing this country.

An issue plaguing and deeply impacting Arab American and American Muslim communities across the country is racial and religious profiling by local, state and federal law enforcement. We have learned through investigative reports, FOIA requests and lawsuits that agencies target communities by religion and national origin. For instance, we learned through the Associated Press that the NYPD engages in unwarranted surveillance of American Muslim communities in the Northeast. They continue to spy on every aspect of Muslim daily life; cafes, mosques, bookstores, community centers, and Muslim student associations. NYPD has gone as far as attempting to infiltrate the Board of Directors of one of our member agencies in New York City. Unwarranted surveillance, racial and religious profiling clearly violates the constitutional rights of these communities. Surveillance chills free speech and creates unnecessary fear, alienation, and isolation. The actions by members of law enforcement can perpetuate biased perceptions of community members through discriminatory policing. Discriminatory police practices diminish trust of law enforcement by targeted communities, including during times when assistance is needed when faced with hate crimes or in cases of domestic violence.

Another issue of concern for the Arab American and American Muslim communities relates to pseudo-experts on Islam and Muslims training law enforcement about our communities. So-called experts have been used to spread misinformation about American Muslims, falsely portraying Muslims as intrinsic threats or fifth columns within the homeland. Moreover within the context of training, faux documentaries, which are in fact anti-Muslim propaganda such as “The Third Jihad” have been shown to law enforcement officials, thus solidify the framework advanced by pseudo-experts to paint loyal Americans as having a secret plan to fundamentally undermine the American way of life. Such trainings shape law enforcement perceptions of Arab Americans and American Muslims, which translates into the misuse of tax dollars and manpower hours of law enforcement as

well as the overextended use of surveillance. I have had the privilege in the past of training probationary FBI agents on how to interact with American Muslims in a religiously sensitive matter. Law enforcement agents and officers need practical information to make lawful interactions between them and our communities comfortable and effective.

Our recommendations include:

- Consult with civil rights, advocacy and community-based organizations regarding trainers that pertain to community outreach and education. In particular, do not invite trainers who have been deemed members of hate groups or have obvious biases towards any communities. Law enforcement should allow members of the community at large to train law enforcement agencies or do presentations. There should be some guidelines set for all trainers or thresholds that must be met. The vetting process must be clear to all parties.
- Create a mechanism for advocates, faith based leaders, community leaders and academics to provide input on training curriculum. The more communities feel included and invested in the curriculum, the more trust this builds amongst communities.
- Allow civil rights leaders and advocates an opportunity to observe aspects of law enforcement trainings about engagement and outreach in Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities and give feedback.
- The Department of Justice should create a civilian review board to give feedback when police departments accrue a significant number of complaints that are systemic or egregious in nature. The review board would consist of community stakeholders and/or advocates that can provide suggestions on what the DOJ mandates on those departments so they can be compliant with civil rights.

We are at a critical juncture in law enforcement and community relations in American society at this time. Training is only one part of reforming policing in our communities. It is an important first step but we must first end policies that target specific communities and ensure that we engage in fair policing that focuses

on criminals and not entire communities. In order to rebuild trust and improve public safety new mechanisms need to be implemented to better ensure that law enforcement is equipped to optimally perform its duties while at the same time purge the potential for biased policing and unwarranted surveillance of communities. We hope that the recommendations presented today will help facilitate this mutual goal of better policing and safer communities.

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