

**Testimony by Mark Winston Griffith of the Brooklyn Movement Center and
Communities United for Police Reform
before the New York City Council Committee on Public Safety**

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Good morning members of the Council Committee on Public Safety.

My name is Mark Winston Griffith and I am the Executive Director of the Brooklyn Movement Center. The Brooklyn Movement Center is a voting member of Communities United for Police Reform and has a seat on CPR's Policy and Community Empowerment Working Groups.

The Brooklyn Movement Center is a grassroots, membership-based, community organizing group dedicated to building power among the mostly Black and low- to moderate-income people living in the Central Brooklyn areas of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights. We mobilize our neighbors to identify issues that are important to them, nurture leadership, and build social change campaigns. These campaigns include organizing Central Brooklyn parents to bring progressive educational reform to the DOE; the organizing of a food co-op and other food sovereignty initiatives; working to end gendered and sexualized street harassment in public spaces; and organizing local residents to defend Central Brooklyn's environmental health.

Most relevantly, BMC has also been working to institutionalize measures that guard against abusive policing and the criminalization of Black and Brown Central Brooklyn

residents since our founding in 2011. Over the last couple of years we've trained and mobilized hundreds of local people around policy accountability and racial justice issues, worked with local city council members on progressive public safety initiatives, helped secure the passage of the two provisions of the Community Safety Act. We've also authored op-eds and have made several appearances on WNYC, NPR, New York 1 and on the pages of the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and New York Daily News. Today our members, in the form of a Police Accountability Working Group, coordinate neighborhood strategy sessions and public education on police accountability; conduct know-your-rights trainings and legislative advocacy; and are building the capacity to mobilize hundreds of Central Brooklyn in response to local emergencies. Ultimately, our Police Accountability Working Group expands the leadership capacity of local people to convert their interests into meaningful actions that address public safety concerns and re-imagines police-community encounters.

I am here today to urge you support the two components of the Right to Know Act – Int. 541 and Proposed Int. 182A - which the Brooklyn Movement Center and Communities United for Police Reform believe are essential to the reconstruction of community policing culture and police-community relations.

To fully appreciate the dynamic between police and community residents in Central Brooklyn, you have to first appreciate the fact that this is a historically African-American and African-Caribbean, as well as a mostly low-income and working class enclave that is undergoing rapid and seismically dramatic demographic and cultural

shifts. The bottom line is that many Black folks who live in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, Ocean-Hill and even Brownsville feel as though we are an endangered species. We have this eerie sense that as economic development, housing improvements, jobs and bright, shiny amenities are arriving, these quality of life improvements are being prepared for someone else's consumption.

In general, many middle class and enfranchised residents rely on the police to address their personal and community safety concerns, by working with commanders and community affairs officers at the precinct and precinct community council level, and as well as other formal channels. Many of these relationships are positive and fruitful and we applaud them. But we're here to also acknowledge that much of our community's anxiety emanates from not too little police presence, but too heavy. Increasingly police are regarded by Black people in Central Brooklyn, particularly renters and young people, as the enforcers of displacement and gentrification, as the ones dispatched to our community to prepare the streets, our homes, our schools, and our commercial corridors for our replacement. It feels as though police have been given the assignment of making Central Brooklyn unaccommodating not just for low-income people, but for Black and brown people of all economic backgrounds. And with so many court-involved or incarcerated young and middle-aged black and brown men, prison seems to be the residential alternative that is being offered.

I was born in Crown Heights and have lived there my entire adult life. I've lived through the crack epidemic of the eighties and nineties when vandalism was an every

day lived experience and gunshots were literally heard almost every day. I can tell you unequivocally that as a pedestrian, biker, mass transit rider and driver, and as a father, black person and man, I have always been far more concerned for my safety at the hands of men in blue than at the hands of men in hoodies.

And at the heart of this concern is the nature of engagements between police and civilians, which, currently, is unhealthy and unsustainable in its current form. This is not just my professional assessment, but a personal one. About 10 years ago I was sitting in a car at night, in the parking lot of retail establishment, while waiting for some merchandise to be loaded into my car. About 10 yards away, an undistinguished car that was also sitting in the parking lot, facing me, began flashing its lights. This continued for about 30 seconds as I sat there confused about what the person behind the wheel was trying to communicate to me. Eventually a man stepped from the vehicle and approached my car, demanded that I roll down the window, and proceeded to reprimanded me for not moving my car as instructed. Admittedly, this was a jurisdiction in New Jersey and I was unfamiliar with the local police uniform. It was dark and I couldn't tell if the officer was a police officer, a security guard or someone else. "I didn't know that you were telling me to move my car," I told the man. "I didn't even know that you were a cop. I still don't know who you are. In fact, who are you?" I asked." He refused to tell me his name. "It doesn't matter who I am" he said. "What matters is that you do what I tell you to do." He proceeded to write me a ticket for an offense that was later dismissed."

In an another incident far closer to home, while jogging in my own Crown Heights neighborhood, I was suddenly surrounded by a group of white men in plain clothes and unmarked cars. Without identifying themselves they put me up against a car, patted me down and searched me without my consent, and, after finding nothing on me, proceeded to drive off without so much as explanation, much less an apology. It was not only demeaning, but frightening because initially, for a moment, I didn't even know they were police officers. In fact, in that instant, they were little else than a gang of thug interlopers who had no respect for me or my community.

Other than civil disobedience, I have never committed a crime, yet I have found myself over the years in at least a dozen encounters with the police. My heart quickens every time I walk or drive by a police officer in Central Brooklyn, which is pretty much everyday. Meanwhile, knock on wood, I've never felt bodily threatened, much less assaulted, by a fellow civilian in all my years living in Brooklyn.

Police officers identifying themselves is the basis for active communication between two human beings in a police-civilian encounter. It provides the foundation for mutual respect, helps to pre-emptively defuse a situation, and can help to reduce - but not eliminate - the threat and sense of complete vulnerable that civilians, particularly men of color, feel when confronted by a stranger. Most importantly, police identification introduces an element of accountability and transparency that can help guard against abusive behavior.

Similarly, Black and Brown civilians have been trained in Central Brooklyn and throughout New York that we have no rights in an encounter with the police and that officers have complete authority and dominion over our personal property and bodies. Just as in a Miranda warning, a verbal acknowledgement that the U.S. constitution is mediating the encounter can be the only action that puts the civilian and police officer in a real world guided by laws and protocol, rather than a separate bubble universe dominated by a person with a gun and an attitude.

At the heart of the change within community policing that is needed is the power dynamic between police officers and civilians. Accountability and transparency are key in encounters because without them, this power is unchecked and abuse becomes inevitable.

Right now, in too many quarters of my community there actually is no functional community-police “relationship.” That term would suggest some form of functional two-way communication and interaction. For many of us, it is a one-way encounter imposed on us arbitrarily, it is a barking of orders, a refusal to listen, and often unnecessary aggression.

The basis of public safety and the idea of a re-booted “relationship” between police and civilians is the premise that there are consequences to all of our actions – both police and civilians - and that we must answer to one another for our actions.

We need to create a culture and practice of law enforcement and criminal justice at all levels that can stand up to scrutiny, can command the public's trust, and will ultimately put power - not physical power, but the power of mutual respect and of human dignity - into the hands of individual citizens and their communities. Passage of the two components of the Right to Know Act can help accomplish what is right now a lofty and seemingly unreachable goal

Thank you.