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Alameda County
Supervisor Keith Carson, Fifth District

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Press Release

Black Elected Officials and Faith Based Leaders, Legal Organizations and Community Groups Condemn Lenient Sentence for Mehserle

Oakland, CA—Former BART Police Officer Johannes Mehserle’s sentence of two years minus time served for the shooting death of Oscar Grant is an example of everything wrong with the criminal justice system, Black elected officials, legal organizations and community groups said today following the sentencing hearing in Los Angeles.

A public statement signed by a number of legal, religious and civil rights groups condemned the light sentence and called attention to the likelihood that Mehserle would have received more jail time if he were a civilian. The statement notes that police officers kill an average of one person a day, and people of color are overrepresented among the dead. Perpetrators of these crimes are rarely prosecuted or punished, and the victims’ families rarely get justice in civil lawsuits. The signatories called for greater transparency in cases involving police misconduct and strongly urged the Justice Department to file charges against Mehserle.

“How can we reasonably expect our young people to believe in the system when they can be shot in the back by law enforcement, on video tape, and the killer is not punished?” asked Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson, Chair of the Black Elected Officials and Faith Based Leaders of the East Bay. “In order for people to believe in the system, it has to treat everyone equally in the way it dispenses justice. To many, this sentence reinforces the belief that justice is not equal or fair. This is not justice for the family of Oscar Grant. “

Areas such as health, government, and law enforcement should be held to a higher standard of care, Carson argued. This sentence, in the eyes of many, undermines that responsibility and can be viewed as allowing a double-standard in which police are not viewed as accountable to communities they serve.

“Many young people and people of color have publicly expressed the belief that had a white police officer been murdered by an African American civilian, the defendant would likely have faced a much harsher sentence,” Carson noted. “Oscar Grant’s death was not an anomaly. To encourage the belief that ‘Justice is blind,’ we call upon the U.S. Justice Department to investigate not only Grant’s death, but and the hundreds of similar actions that take place each and every day throughout this county.”

Community members who choose to protest must do so peacefully, Carson added.

Organizations and individuals signing onto the statement include the Black Elected Officials and Faith Based Leaders of the East Bay; The San Francisco Chapter of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights; the California Chapter and the Oakland Branch of the NAACP; Rabbi David Cooper, Kehilla Community Synagogue; and Minister Keith Muhammad, Nation of Islam.

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