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**RASE Co-Chairs address the death of Daniel Prude and the
Police Response to the Protests**

The co-chairs of the **Racial and Structural Equity Commission (RASE)**, created in June 2020 by Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren and Monroe County Executive Adam Bello, are reacting to the events surrounding the March 23rd police confrontation with Daniel Prude, and his subsequent death on March 30th, and to the wide scale protest demonstrations that have been mounted city-wide during the past week. The Commission, comprised of 21 persons from across the City and County, is charged with identifying systemic and institutional inequities and racism in laws, policies and practices in the government sector, and to develop strategies, policies and programs to systematically dismantle structural racism across our community.

Immediately after the news of Mr. Prude's fatal encounter with the RPD, and the release of video documentation of the police offices' actions, the co-chairs sent a letter to Mayor Warren strongly protesting that the Commission had not been advised that this case was under investigation, even though authorities knew these details at the time the Commissioners were seated. Mayor Warren and County Executive Bello were summoned to meet with the full commission, where they had to respond to tough questions about the withholding of information, and why the police were confronting protesters with tear gas, pepper balls, spray hoses, police dogs and armored vehicles. A follow-up meeting with RPD Chief La 'Ron Singletary, a former Commission member, had to be re-scheduled, since he was scheduled to appear on the day he announced his retirement. The nine working groups have been joined by more than 200 citizens, and they are beginning to work on key issues which fall within their work plans.

Following is the full text of their message:

“Like every citizen of this community, we learned a week ago of the tragic death of Daniel Prude on March 30th, stemming from his encounter with the Rochester Police Department (RPD) a week earlier. We extend our most heartfelt condolences to his family. As is now known, Mr. Prude was having severe mental health challenges, and his family sought RPD intervention for the sole purpose of returning him to a healthcare institution where he would receive proper care. A few hours earlier, Mr. Prude had been brought into the University of Rochester Medical Center (URMC) for treatment, but he was not held and was shortly released for a return home. Unfortunately, the police intervention turned tragic, resulting in the loss of Mr. Prude's life. These events are currently being investigated by several bodies, including the NYS Attorney General, the Rochester City Council, and the Police Accountability Board. A federal lawsuit on behalf of the Prude family was just announced. Several advocacy groups have presented demands for comprehensive reform to the City and County governments.

“There are several things about these events which are troubling, some of which fall within the purview of our Commission’s work. The Commission is not an investigative body, nor is it an agency of either appointing authority. It is an independent citizen’s body that has been created and charged with the responsibility of identifying systemic failures and structural barriers that lead to disparate treatment and inequitable access to services and benefits for people of color, especially African Americans; and to make recommendations for substantive and permanent changes. Its final recommendations will be publicly released, and we envision developing mechanisms to insure public follow-up and implementations on these findings.

The following questions suggest some of the problems encountered by Mr. Prude and his family:

1. Why was Daniel Prude released from the care of URMC without a more thorough examination and extended observation after a mere three hours?
2. The Prude family called 911 for a mental health intervention. Why were no mental health professionals dispatched along with police officers? In the early 2000’s, the RPD created an Emotionally Disturbed Persons Response Team, which had a core of 60-70 specially trained personnel that was required to be dispatched in circumstances like this. Does the RPD still employ that resource? What other trained resources are currently available to the department, and were they dispatched?
3. Once at the scene and observing his distressful behavior, particularly being completely undressed in frigid weather, why was not there more attention shown towards his care? Mr. Prude lay on a cold city street, in handcuffs, for approximately 30 minutes? Why did not one official at the scene offer him a blanket or other clothing to cover his bare body? The account witnessed on the video was void of empathy toward Mr. Prude, robbing him of the dignity and care he deserved. This is the one fact that stands out to so many citizens, who have severely criticized the conduct of the officers at the scene.
4. Are there elements of police officer training that need to be re-examined and revised? We have heard the repeated assertions of police and union officials that the officers followed their training protocols in the way they handled Prude. Was this treatment part of this training?
5. Why did the RPD report this event to the Mayor as a drug overdose, without describing all of the related events that occurred on the streets that evening? What are the requirements for full reporting to the Mayor by the RPD in matters involving use of deadly force?
6. Why did it take more than five months before details of this crisis were made public? And why did that notification come from the Prude family attorneys, rather than the RPD chief and the Mayor?
7. Most importantly for the Commission’s work, why wasn’t this matter brought to the Commission’s attention much sooner? Our work is divided into specific focus areas, and two of them are Policing and Mental Health. Prior knowledge that such an event had occurred, locally and recently, may have caused us to organize this work differently.

“We immediately communicated our concerns to the Mayor on September 2nd, and had a Zoom meeting with her and the County Executive on Sunday September 6th. Meanwhile, we immediately requested that two of her appointees, the Chief of the RPD and the President of the Police Locust Club, be replaced as Commissioners, due to their close involvement with any investigations into this case. We also found that

whatever the merits of their participation, they would be strongly offset by the distractions to the ongoing work which their presence would cause.

“At that meeting, many Commissioners voiced very strong concern about the police tactics with the protesters, especially the evening before our meeting. The use of dogs was strongly condemned, as was the use of tear gas and other devices which were fired directly into the crowds. Several Commissioners and Commission staff were injured by the use of these weapons. The Commissioners were adamant to learn who had ordered the deployment of these “aggressive tactics” upon citizens who were exercising their constitutional rights to protest what they perceive to be wrongful actions by the government, as well as what actions of the protesters provoked this level of response. As a result, another meeting with Chief Singletary was scheduled.

“In the month since the Commission has been fully ramped up, nine (9) working groups have begun their work. In addition to **Policing** and **Mental Health and Addiction Services**, the other groups are dealing with other aspects of the **Criminal Justice** system; **Education: Healthcare; Housing; Job Creation; Business Development;** and **Human and Social Services**. These groups will not exist in silos, but their work will demonstrate the intersection of these systems and how they reinforce the systemic inequities and racism which constantly constrain the progress of people of color in this community and nationwide. More than 200 people have voluntarily joined these groups, and their work plans are currently being finalized. Extensive outreach to gain community input and creative solutions is being planned for the fall. The Commission’s final report will be submitted in February 2021.

“In a poignant way, the Prude case dramatically emphasizes the importance of our work. Before, we were looking at the important issues around policing and mental health in the abstract. Now we have a local case which will inform our work. This is reminiscent of the **Denise Hawkins case** in 1975, when a young Rochester housewife died tragically at the hands of the RPD. Then-Mayor Thomas P Ryan, Jr appointed a fifteen member Citizen Committee on Police Affairs to undertake a thorough review of RPD policies, practices and procedures. A nine-point charge was issued, and the Committee worked for nearly a year to completely redesign the department. Upon submission of the final report, the City Council subsequently adopted most of its proposals into law.

“The experience from 45 years ago is instructive. While all of the issues within departmental operations were not remediated, many significant ones were; and some of those changes remain in effect today. This is an example of what has been done in this community when all parties have the will and the trust to work together to solve a most challenging set of circumstances. This is a model for the possibilities for this time in our history. **The RASE Commission** will use the authority granted to it to identify every example of systemic racism and inequitable treatment of people of color, and to propose sound and sustainable solutions that can be adopted by legislative bodies.

“We wish these circumstances had not occurred as they did, but we are convinced that they will deepen our resolve to address the deeply ingrained racist practices that affect every aspect of American life, with new laws, policies and practices that will permanently eradicate all legal and structural inequities, and class and racial biases.

“We commit to keep the community constantly informed, and to seek the broadest level of community engagement about the Commission’s work throughout the conduct of our work.”

NOTE: The co-chairs are **Arline L Bayo Santiago**, Senior Vice President and General Counsel of ESL Federal Credit Union; **Dr. Muhammed Shafiq**, Professor and Executive Director, Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue, Nazareth College; and **William A Johnson, Jr.**, Founder and CEO, Strategic Community Intervention LLC and the 64th Mayor of Rochester (1994-2005).