

July 17, 2020

To:

Mayor Tom Barrett  
Members of the Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission  
Members of the Milwaukee City Council

We are a group of healthcare professionals from across the City of Milwaukee who are expressing concern about the use of “less-lethal weapons” by law enforcement against citizens of our city gathering to protest. These weapons include chemical irritants like tear gas and pepper spray and kinetic impact projectiles like rubber bullets.

While these weapons have been viewed by law enforcement officials as important in situations where some degree of force is deemed necessary, they may also kill or inflict serious injury on victims. This is especially true when they are not used in accordance with the weapons’ specifications, the general principles on the use of force, or fundamental human rights. As healthcare providers who care for patients injured by these weapons, we have witnessed first-hand the devastating injuries they can cause.

As such, we are calling for an immediate ban on the use of tear gas and rubber bullets by law enforcement in the City of Milwaukee.

Tear gas was developed as a tool for physical and psychological torture and is banned from use in warfare, yet this chemical irritant continues to be used in the U.S. by law enforcement. Tear gas can cause broad and indiscriminate injuries which, according to the national organization Physicians for Human Rights, could be a violation of International Human Rights principles. Tear gas can cause tearing, blurred vision, burning and irritation of the mouth and nose, coughing, wheezing and skin burns. Long-lasting exposure or exposure to a large dose may cause blindness, immediate death due to severe chemical burns to the throat and lungs, and respiratory failure possibly resulting in death.

The use of tear gas on protesters is also in direct conflict with infection control measures necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19. Its use can increase the spread of infection by irritating the respiratory tract thereby increasing inflammation and inducing cough which disperses droplets throughout the surrounding environment.

Kinetic impact projectiles can result in skull fractures, intracranial hematomas, seizures, permanent damage to the eyes, and even blindness. Direct hits to the torso can cause damage to vital organs.

Our community members who have been gathering to protest are doing so in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Dontre Hamilton and so many other Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement. We stand with those community members who are demanding change and calling for an end to the racist policies and practices that have disproportionately impacted Black people across the U.S.

As healthcare professionals caring for the people of Wisconsin in clinics, hospitals, and emergency departments we know the devastating consequences that these policies have on the physical and emotional health of our Black patients. Between 2014-16, Wisconsin’s gap in life expectancy between the state’s Black and white citizens was greater than 6 years, well above the national average. In some segregated areas within the city of Milwaukee, Black children have poverty rates of more than 40% in some areas of our city and Black children living in Milwaukee are disproportionately impacted by chronic health conditions like asthma.

It is the responsibility of local government and law enforcement to ensure the safety of our citizens who are protesting to call attention to these and other disparities and to demand reform. Escalation of aggression by law enforcement against protesters has led to deaths in other cities. This could absolutely happen in Milwaukee if less-lethal weapons continue to be used. The cities of Denver, Seattle, Portland, Dallas, and San Jose have recognized this danger and have all issued temporary bans on tear gas and/or rubber bullets.

Using less-lethal weapons as a means of crowd control against individuals exercising their constitutional right to assemble is unconscionable. We urge you to ban the use of chemical irritants and kinetic impact projectiles on protesters as our community works towards a more equitable future for Black Americans.

This letter represents the views of the following signatories, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

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