

BOARD OF ETHICS AND GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY
OFFICE OF OPEN GOVERNMENT



**STATEMENT OF THE DIRECTOR OF OPEN GOVERNMENT
REGARDING THE TREATMENT OF THE PRESS DURING THE MASS
DEMONSTRATIONS RESULTING FROM THE MURDER OF
GEORGE FLOYD**

JUNE 4, 2020

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American male, was murdered by former Minneapolis police officers after they detained him for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. This murder was videotaped by several bystanders and that footage was widely circulated. What resulted was mass protests in Minnesota, which have spread throughout the United States and the World. In the United States, people have lawfully expressed their First Amendment rights to call for the arrest of the perpetrators of this crime and for reform in police practices that threaten the safety and well-being of African Americans, especially young men. The media has been present to provide live coverage of these mass demonstrations.

Many have spoken on the numerous civil rights and other Constitutional issues that these events have brought to the forefront, as I am doing today. One of those issues, which I am focusing on with this statement, is the Freedom of the Press. Journalists have faced arrest, physical force, chemical agents, and verbal assaults while exercising their First Amendment rights during the protests. Cameras and other equipment have been destroyed or damaged; and, they have been hit with projectiles, rubber bullets, wooden bullets, fired at them during the course of their coverage. Journalists have met this fate while clearly displaying media credentials and actively reporting. The most visible violation came when CNN reporter Omar Jimenez and his crew members were arrested on live television while reporting. Another visible violation occurred here in DC, in Lafayette Square, where reporters documenting a peaceful assembly were physically assaulted and cleared by police with tear gas and flash bang grenades in advance of Donald Trump's photo shoot in front of the historic St. John's Episcopal Church. During this incident, a police officer was recorded using his shield to attack an Australian cameraman who was part of a team reporting live in front of the White House.

Freedom of the Press is woven into the fabric of our nation and the U.S. Constitution. It is essential for the media to have access to the government to keep it open and accountable to the people it serves. The First Amendment protects the work of journalists as they publicly document government activity. These incidents are blatant violations on the constitutional rights of individual reporters and the public's interest in receiving accurate information and holding the government accountable. The Office of Open Government is here to support journalists in their mission to keep the government accountable and finds the actions of those who attempt to violate the U.S. Constitution disgraceful and unacceptable.