Public Defenders, like so many other people, were disgusted and appalled by the images of a police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck while his fellow officers looked on and did nothing. Disgusted, appalled, but sadly not surprised. We defenders witness firsthand the injustice wrought on people of color in this country.

Our mission is to ensure justice and a fair and unbiased system by zealously promoting and protecting the rights, liberty and dignity of all clients entrusted to us. We try every day to force the criminal justice system to see our clients as individuals. Too often the criminal justice system and society as a whole, sees our clients as a monolith. We are asked “How can you defend those people”. Those people are all of us. The rights set forth in our Constitution are supposed to guarantee life, liberty and dignity to everyone. Our clients come to us after interactions with law enforcement. Everything depends on how that interaction begins and too often it begins with distrust, disrespect and aggression towards the folks who will become our clients. Community members, families and dedicated police officers must be empowered to speak up against bias, discrimination and violence. As a society, we must all join in the effort to secure justice for everyone.

No matter what they may be accused of, the people we represent are human beings, entitled to dignity, fairness and to have their specific personal story be told. Racial inequalities permeate every part of our society due to generations of discrimination and economic policies designed to continue structural disparities. Our black and brown brethren accumulate criminal records for minor charges because they live in more densely populated and more highly policed neighborhoods than their suburban white counterparts. This accumulation leads to increasingly harsh penalties from the criminal justice system and subsequently devastating collateral consequence. Those consequences impact families, employment, educational opportunities and housing and inhibit the ability to have happy, successfully lives.

As public defenders, we are committed to holistic representation that recognizes clients as individuals, fosters trust, and prevents unnecessary and wrongful conviction. This includes advocating for policy changes that will require accountability for members of law enforcement that unjustly take the life of another. We must continue to stand up for our clients, our brothers and sisters, our fellow humans and continue to speak up zealously against injustice and in favor of reform.

The Office of the Chief Public Defender and public defenders across Connecticut stand in solidarity with those who are protesting the injustices caused by structural racism in our country. We will be an ally for change in our political and judicial systems. It is a battle worth fighting for and we will continue until the ideals of liberty, opportunity and equality are truly accessible to all.