

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, January 23, 2023

Emory doctors condemn police violence against Cop City protests

Defend the Atlanta Forest has received the following submitted statement:

As health care workers, we strongly condemn the repeated escalation of police violence in their interactions with members of the public protesting the construction of Cop City¹. On various instances, in both the streets of Atlanta as well as in the Weelaunee Forest/Intrenchment Creek Park which is under threat of destruction, police have used violence^{2 3 4} including reports of toxic chemical irritants such as tear gas, rubber bullets⁵ and now live ammunition which most recently resulted in the police killing of one of the forest defenders, Manuel ‘Tortuguita’ Teran. A year after police in the U.S. killed more people than any prior year since records started to be tracked in 2013⁶, we recognize violence perpetrated by police to be harmful to public health. We are also concerned by the detentions and the charges of domestic terrorism levied at individuals arrested while protesting the destruction of the forest. This fits within the context of a disturbing pattern and threat to public health whereby the USA has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world⁷; perpetuated by a judicial and legislative system that targets Black and Indigenous peoples, migrants, those living in poverty, those who are unhoused, as well as environmental and social activists^{8 9}.

The construction of Cop City will not solve a government’s failures to listen to the wishes of members of the community, its failure to stop the widening gap between rich and poor, the lack of affordable housing, the negative effects of gentrification and racism, or the poor and unequal access to nutritious food, healthcare and mental health services. As physicians, we recognize that these failures have negative consequences on the public’s mental and physical health. Instead of strengthening community health, Cop City will be a dangerous attempt to invest in harmful and violent solutions, strengthening the corporate and political powers that seek profit over the well-being of the people, while simultaneously eroding and transforming natural and public spaces into privately owned property. The public health evidence for developing healthy and thriving communities strongly opposes the expansion of policing and its subsequent violence^{10 11}. All Atlanta communities deserve more life affirming investments, not those that value private property over human life.

For the well-being of the city and its residents, it is imperative that all police forces cease their continued escalation and violent activity by permanently withdrawing from the forest. We call on Georgia State University to end its support of the Cop City project and also the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange (GILEE) project. We also call on Atlanta mayor Andre Dickens, the Atlanta city council and the DeKalb County government to withdraw from all plans regarding the construction of Cop City; and for the DeKalb County government to withdraw from the land swap with Ryan Millsap and instead keep Intrenchment Creek Park a public park. We also call on Brasfield & Gorrie to end their contract with the Atlanta Police Foundation and cease all construction that furthers the destruction of the forest which has and will harm the community and the public health.

Signed,

Michel Khoury, MD, Co-director of Georgia Human Rights Clinic

Amy Zeidan, MD, Co-director of Georgia Human Rights Clinic

Mark Spencer, MD, Co-Leader, Internal Medicine Advocacy Group

Suhaib Abaza, MD, Co-founder, Campaign Against Racism ATL chapter

Social Medicine Consortium

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¹ Also known as Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, with stated purposes including the construction of a mock city for 'urban police training' and 'Emergency Operations Center for collaborative law enforcement training'. <https://www.atlantaga.gov/Home/Components/News/News/13827/1338?npage=2&arch=1>

² <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/lethal-in-disguise.pdf>

³ <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/health-impacts-of-crowd-control-weapons-chemical-irritants-tear-gas-and-pepper-spray/>

⁴ <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/health-impacts-of-crowd-control-weapons-kinetic-impact-projectiles-rubber-bullets/>

⁵ <https://bittersoutherner.com/feature/2023/little-turtles-war-cop-city-atlanta>

⁶ <https://mappingpoliceviolence.us/>

⁷ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2021.html>

⁸ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/the-color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons-the-sentencing-project/>

⁹ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/10/08/indigenouspeoplesday/>

¹⁰ <https://www.apha.org/Policies-and-Advocacy/Public-Health-Policy-Statements/Policy-Database/2022/01/07/Advancing-Public-Health-Interventions-to-Address-the-Harms-of-the-Carceral-System>

¹¹ <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/29/law-enforcement-violence>