

NEWS

Get out of jail virus free



Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail

SKYCLAD AERIAL

Coronavirus crisis sees local justice system adopt progressive reforms, for now

By Ben Hitchcock
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Chanell Jackson is home early. The local resident and mother of three had about seven weeks left on her six-month sentence in Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail when she was transferred to house arrest in late March. She's one of the 61 nonviolent offenders who have so far been released with ankle monitors, as the ACRJ braces itself for the worst-case scenario playing out in prisons across the country: a coronavirus outbreak within the jail.

"It feels good to be home and with my family, especially with everything that's going on," Jackson says. "In the jail it's scarier if you get sick. I don't feel like I would be able to quarantine properly."

Jackson's concerns are legitimate: More than 5 percent of inmates in New York's huge Rikers Island complex have already tested positive for COVID-19, meaning the jail has a higher infection rate than any country in the world. In Virginia, three inmates and four staff at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women have confirmed cases of the virus, which is especially concerning given the facility's history—in 2019, a judge determined the jail had failed to provide sufficient health care after four women died while incarcerated there.

Also nearby, local advocacy groups report that 100 immigrants held in a Farmville ICE detention center have gone on a hunger strike to protest their continued incarceration despite confirmed cases of the virus in the jail. The facility, run by the for-profit company Immigration Centers of

America, experienced a mumps outbreak last year. ICE has denied that the current strike is occurring.

"The jails and prisons already don't have adequate health care for people who are inmates," says Harold Folley, a community organizer at the Legal Aid Justice Center. Given the virus, "if you lock somebody up, I feel like it's a death sentence to them."

Under normal circumstances, ACRJ has six "hospital cells" for more than 400 inmates.

ACRJ Superintendent Martin Kumer understands the concern. "I want to be clear, jails and prisons are not set up for social distancing," he says. "They're designed to house as many people as efficiently and effectively as possible."

Emptying out

Across the country, advocates have demanded that local justice systems reduce the risk for incarcerated populations by letting as many people as possible out of jails. Some such programs are underway—in March, California announced it would release 3,500 people over the next two months.

Locally, some prosecutors have enacted progressive emergency measures designed to reduce jail populations. Others haven't deviated from their usual practices.

Charlottesville Commonwealth's Attorney Joe Platania and his Albemarle counterpart Jim Hingeley have worked with the jail to identify nonviolent prisoners with short amounts of time left on their sentences, and transfer those people to house arrest or release them on time served. The commonwealth's attorneys have also recommended releasing nonviolent prisoners being held pretrial. That's resulted in 122 of the jail's 430 inmates leaving the premises so far.

Nelson County prisoners also go to ACRJ, but Nelson County Commonwealth's Attorney Daniel Rutherford, a Republican who campaigned on aggressively prosecuting drug crimes, has not participated in the efforts to decrease the jail population, says Hingeley. Rutherford did not respond to a request for comment.

"People don't understand, the commonwealth's attorneys have so much damn power," Folley says. "Joe and Jim have the ability to release people to home monitoring free of charge." Normally, offenders must pay their own home monitoring costs, up to \$13 per day.

"Home electronic incarceration is not release," says Hingeley, a point Platania also emphasizes. People on HEI are still incarcerated, and can be returned to the jail without any court getting involved if they violate the terms of their house arrest by doing things like traveling without permission or failing a drug screening.

A history of violent convictions will ensure an inmate stays in jail, Kumer says, but there are other considerations, too, like if the inmate is medically vulnerable or where they might go upon release. "We have a large number of individuals who are otherwise nonviolent but they have no place to live," Kumer says, so they have to stay in jail.

Police Chief Rashall Brackney supports the shift to home monitoring. "I am very confident in the commonwealth's attorneys, as well

as the superintendent, that they are reviewing those cases and taking a very careful look at each of those individuals who would qualify," she says. That's a more tempered tone than some other police chiefs in Virginia: "The COVID-19 pandemic is NOT a get-of-out-jail-free card in Chesterfield County," that county's police chief wrote in a Facebook post. Last week, two employees at the Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center in Chesterfield County tested positive for COVID-19.

The jail is emotionally isolating in the best of circumstances, Jackson says, and coronavirus precautions won't help—all visitation has been halted, except attorneys. The jail is offering two free emails and two free phone calls per week to try to ameliorate the situation. (Normally, an email costs 50 cents—"a stamp will cost you more than that," Kumer notes—and a phone call costs 12 cents per minute.)

Fewer people behind bars means prisoners can be more spread out and the facility requires less staff to operate. Kumer says the plan is to segregate—the jail has emptied out and rearranged one wing to house all inmates who start exhibiting symptoms.

For now, inmates and officials wait with bated breath to hear the virus' dry cough rattle through the cell blocks. So far, "no one has been symptomatic enough to test," says Kumer.

Despite these precautions, Kumer isn't rosy-eyed about the situation. "There's not a lot we can do if an outbreak does occur," he says.

Looking ahead

The 308 inmates currently inside the jail is the smallest number in at least 20 years, says Hingeley.

The emergency measures represent baby steps toward a more equitable justice system. The city-commissioned Disproportionate Minority Contact report earlier this year concluded that black people were disproportionately punished at every level of the local justice system. As it turns out, releasing nonviolent offenders and people serving short sentences disproportionately helps black people: A little less than half the jail's total population is black, but two-thirds of



Chanell Jackson was transferred to house arrest because the local justice system is preparing for coronavirus by reducing the population inside the regional jail.

ZACK WAUSGRAS

the people transferred to HEI due to coronavirus are black.

“There’s a lot of folks who are not paying attention to people who are incarcerated,” says Folley. “When you think of people incarcerated you think, automatically, they are criminals, right. But what people should know is they are human, too.”

“I think they definitely should offer [HEI] more,” Jackson says. “There’s still rules and regulations that you follow, but some people have minor violations and they’re being incarcerated and taken away from their family. At least on home monitoring you can stay home and take care of your family. Because every day is precious.”

Jackson says she loves cooking, and she’s been doing plenty of it since she got home. Her favorite thing to make is lasagna; she just pulled one out of the oven. “I’m very family oriented. I’m very happy to be home with them,” she says. “I have a younger daughter, she’s 1, so I’ve been catching up with her, spending time with her... Everything is mama, mama where’s my mama,” she says, laughing.

Will the change last? That depends who you ask.

“We’re taking some calculated risks with some of these decisions,” Platania says—he doesn’t want to “overreact one way or another.”

He says it’s “absolutely” possible that the local justice system takes a more progressive view of sentencing and bail decisions after coronavirus. “But you know to turn that on its head,” he adds, “if we make a decision to release someone on a nonviolent larceny offense, and they break in to someone’s house and steal something or hurt someone, do we then say well, everything we did was unsafe and foolhardy?”

Hingeley, who ran his 2019 campaign as a candidate for prosecutorial reform and alternatives to incarceration, is more direct.

“I want to be clear, jails and prisons are not set up for social distancing.”

MARTIN KUMER, ALBEMARLE-CHARLOTTESVILLE REGIONAL JAIL SUPERINTENDENT

“Absolutely it is my goal to have these practices last,” he says. “From my perspective these are things that we should be doing.”

The emergency measures offer an unusual opportunity to see progressive policies in practice. “We are going to be accumulating information about the effects of liberalized policies with respect to sentences and bail decisions,” Hingeley says. “I am optimistic that that experience—as hard as it comes to us, in this emergency—that experience nevertheless is going to teach us valuable lessons. And we’ll see big changes going forward.”

“I can take the initiative, but other people have to agree,” Hingeley says. Platania also emphasizes that judges are a coequal branch of government to prosecutors, and though there’s been great “judicial buy-in” during this emergency, that won’t necessarily be true in the future.

“I do hope that this will change the system,” Folley says, “but it takes a number of people with courage.”

Class dismissed

School closings intensify equity issues

By Brielle Entzminger

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With Virginia’s K-12 schools shuttered for the remainder of the academic year, our city and county districts have moved into uncharted territory: figuring out not only how to teach thousands of students outside of the classroom, but also making distance learning accessible and equitable for all.

The districts say they are still developing formal distance learning programs, which will be rolled out after spring break, on April 13. In the meantime, some teachers in both the city and county have provided students with optional online modules and activities, reviewing previously taught material. Educators have also been using video conference services like Zoom and Google Hangouts to bring kids together.

Accessing these resources, however, is more difficult for some than others. Up to 30 percent of Albemarle County Public Schools students don’t have adequate access to the internet at home. And while Charlottesville City Schools do not have division-wide data on students’ internet access, its most recent CHS student survey indicated that 6 percent of households have no internet.

To bridge this digital divide, ACPS has boosted the WiFi signal at all of its schools, as well the Yancey School Community Center, allowing anyone to get onto the internet from parking lots. Several hundred cars have already been spotted taking advantage of this crucial resource, according to ACPS spokesman Phil Giaramita.

ACPS has also leased part of its broadband spectrum to Shentel, enabling the company to expand internet to more rural, underserved households in the area. With the lease revenue, it’s ordered about 100 Kajeet Smart Spots, which are “devices you can install in your house that will access the network of local carriers in your area,” explains Giaramita. Once they’re delivered, “we’re going to start distributing those to teachers [and students] who don’t have internet access at home,” and will order more as needed.

In the city, CCS recommends that students who have inadequate internet access connect to an AT&T or Xfinity hot spot, as both companies have recently opened up all of their U.S. hot spots to non-customers. The district is also distributing hot spots to students who are unable to use those publicly available.

Both city and county school districts are giving laptops to students in grades two and up who need them. ACPS also plans to distribute iPads to kindergarteners through second graders. At CCS, learning guides are available online for pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade students with suggested activities that do not require access to the internet.

Despite these efforts, CHS senior Jack Dreesen-Higginbotham remains concerned



Jack Jouett teacher Heather Dow sits in her car outside the middle school to utilize the public WiFi. Dow lives in Greene County, and does not have a fast enough internet connection to take Zoom calls for work.

about the city’s transition to distance learning. “I know they’ve been working on trying to set up hot spots for students, but I don’t know if it will be accessible to everybody. And [still], not everyone has a school-provided laptop,” he says. “My brother, who is in sixth grade, wasn’t provided one, so he’s had to use mine to do his work.”

However, Dreesen-Higginbotham’s CHS teachers, who currently use Zoom, are doing a “very good job at instructing their classes and organizing lessons, so that they can be inclusive to everybody,” he says.

After spring break, both CCS and ACPS will provide more formal online—and of-line—academic instruction and enrichment for each grade level.

“We’re looking at finding specific solutions for individual families, whether online, offline, or a combination,” says CCS spokeswoman Beth Cheuk.

“Offline could simply mean working with kids by telephone, by regular mail. We’ve asked teachers to be creative, so that there isn’t any student who is disadvantaged by their access to technology,” adds Giaramita.

While students will learn new material through distance learning, there will be no grading (or SOLs). Instead, teachers will provide feedback on a regular basis.

To former CHS teacher Maggie Thornton, now a Ph.D. candidate in educational leadership at UVA, this is an opportunity for local schools to explore different types of evaluation systems.

“I hope that we can make lemonade out of these lemons, and re-evaluate a lot of our policies—grading is certainly one of them,” she says.

“We’ve [also] known for a long time that our standardized testing system has created

a lot of inequality,” Thornton adds. “We can be rethinking assessments at this time, and how we can make it more formative and more useful in instruction.”

Both school divisions want to ensure that as many students as possible graduate or are promoted to the next grade level. Per guidance from the Virginia Department of Education, students who were on track to pass before schools closed will do so. But on April 6, ACPS announced that if distance learning is not “the best fit” for a student, they will have the option to complete the school year by attending classes in July, or (excluding seniors) during the next school year.

While ACPS’ lesson plans will not go into effect until April 13, Giaramita says one of its distance-learning initiatives has already been implemented: Check and Connect. Students will now be contacted at least once a week by a teacher, counselor, administrator, or principal to talk about their distance learning experience, what assistance they need, and what their internet access is like. So that no student is left out, this contact can take place by phone, email, video call, or even snail mail.

CCS has also asked teachers to connect with each of their students to identify which ones need additional support, regarding WiFi or other issues.

Such practices may be particularly beneficial to those who do not have parents at home to help and support them throughout the day.

“So many service workers are being considered essential, and are doing essential work. But that means often that their kids are going to be home alone without adult interaction,” Thornton says. “The relationships between teachers and students are [going to be] key.”

NEWS

Charlottesville

POLICE

Under scrutiny

STAFF PHOTO

Will ongoing protests finally lead to better police-community relations?

By Ben Hitchcock
news@c-ville.com

The nation is up in arms. After the murder of George Floyd, protesters filled the streets of Charlottesville, Richmond, Washington D.C., and cities across the country, demonstrating against police brutality. As the smoke clears in coming weeks, these activists will look to translate the energy of the protests into lasting change.

"I think we're in a similar position now, nationwide, as Charlottesville was in 2017," says Sarah Burke, a criminal investigator and member of Charlottesville's initial Police Civilian Review Board. "People are rightfully questioning a lot of police policy and action, and demanding change."

Charlottesville residents might be familiar with the type of reforms other cities are now demanding. At the behest of protesters, a majority of Richmond City Council members have committed to the creation of that city's own police civilian review board, which would provide oversight in a variety of different ways, including giving people a forum to lodge complaints about the police mistreatment of residents. After the Unite the Right rally in 2017, Charlottesville City Council made the same commitment, passing a resolution calling for the institution of a strong CRB.

Charlottesville's council began by putting together an initial board, a mixture of criminal justice experts and black community leaders, tasked with researching best practices and community needs and then drafting bylaws for a permanent body. Last Monday, two and a half years after Unite the Right, the official CRB's last member was finally appointed. The executive director position has yet to be filled, and the adoption of the board's bylaws remains contentious.

The evolution of the CRB provides a snapshot of police-community relations in Charlottesville, and also shows what it takes to transform a dramatic, flashpoint event into lasting institutional change.

Trust issues

"We did this for the community," says Gloria Beard, a long-time Charlottesville resident and member of the initial CRB. "We promised the community that they would have somebody they could go to for complaints. Most of them don't feel good going to the police department."

In a letter from the initial CRB to the police department this week, which Burke and Beard signed, the board writes, "Police killings, police beatings, and militarized police presence are nothing new to many of us. This community understands those problems, because it has been in this fight for years, even decades."

Charlottesville Police Chief RaShall Brackney says she understands where people like Beard are coming from.

"There have been recognized failures for a very long time—including those failures in 2017—to understand what race relationships look like," Brackney says.

"We've been trying to build trust in this community since I arrived," says Brackney, who took over as chief in the summer of 2018. "What are those areas that we absolutely know build trust and legitimacy in communities? One is transparency."

The chief says the department is posting "unprecedented" amounts of internal data on its website, for all to see, including internal affairs inquiries, charging data, use of force, and "investigative detentions" (stop-and-frisks).

That might not tell the whole story, though. "Data is only as good as what you collect," Burke says. "Right now, for example, all the stop-and-frisk data that we get is in a PowerPoint presentation, filtered through whatever lens the police department filters it through. It's not necessarily that it's wrong, we just don't know."

Another recent sticking point is the department's budget—the police department gets around \$18 million per year from a cash-strapped city government. This week, Charlottesville resident Matthew Gillikin sent an email asking the police department for "the most detailed budget you have," and was directed to a seven-line summary in the full city budget; when he tweeted that he hadn't received enough information, the department's official account responded, "It's not clear why you would accuse us of being unhelpful." (C-VILLE has also requested a full budget, but it was not available by press time.)

The department has recently made other unforced, trust-busting errors. Last year, the police hung cameras in the majority-black public housing neighborhood Westhaven, without notifying residents of the surveillance; then they took the cameras down and dodged questions about why they had been put up in the first place. And until December, the department's fleet included a gray Dodge Challenger (the same make, model, and color as the car used to kill Heather Heyer), complete with Blue Lives Matter decaling.

In the last two weeks, demand for information about the police department's practices has only increased. "I'm getting hundreds of emails right now, [asking] what are your policies, do your officers have body-worn cameras," Brackney says. "If you looked on our website, you could see and answer those questions yourselves."

At the end of last week, the department sent out an email in response to "numerous

Keeping the pressure on

The ongoing local response to George Floyd's Memorial Day murder in Minneapolis included a massive demonstration in Charlottesville on May 30, when hundreds of peaceful protesters marched from the city's police station to Washington Park. A mural of George Floyd's face appeared on the Downtown Mall's Freedom of Speech Wall June 3. UVA health care workers and others took a knee for eight minutes and 46 seconds to honor Floyd at the university's Memorial to Enslaved Laborers June 5. More than a thousand demonstrators gathered at the UVA Rotunda on June 7.



EZE AMOS



STAFF PHOTO



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media and community requests” for information about its policies. The release reveals that officers receive only two hours of state-mandated “cultural diversity/bias-based policing” training every other year.

With regards to transparency, “The efforts [Brackney] has made have certainly been in the right direction,” says Burke. “I just don’t think it’s anywhere near enough.”

The hold up

These questions about data dissemination and trust-building could be addressed by a powerful review board. The process of instituting a CRB has been convoluted, however.

The initial CRB, appointed in the summer of 2018, spent a year researching civilian oversight and, last September, submitted a set of bylaws that had “real teeth,” says Burke. Over the next three months, City Council passed around the bylaws, rewrote portions of them, and eventually voted through a weaker set of rules than the CRB had proposed.

The initial board members argue that the new bylaws give too much power to the executive director, a full-time staff member who would be hired by the city manager. The new bylaws also remove the requirement that the police department attend community listening sessions, remove the ability for the CRB to review complaints that are sustained by the police department, and don’t give the board access to raw arrest data.

The new bylaws were adopted 4-1, with then-vice mayor Wes Bellamy opposing.

Since then, three new members have come on council, and the initial review board members, as well as a number of community activists, have called for the new council to vote again on the original bylaws.

“The problem for me is an issue of political will,” says local activist Walt Heinecke, who has

forcefully advocated for the adoption of the initial bylaws. Heinecke notes that Michael Payne, Sena Magill, and Lloyd Snook all expressed support for the initial bylaws during their council campaigns, but that Snook no longer supports revisiting the issue.

Other councilors want to let the incoming board members write their own rules, rather than impose the initial board’s deeply researched guidelines. “What we’ve said all along is that the new board members can tell us how they function best,” said Mayor Nikuyah Walker at council’s most recent meeting.

Refusing to revisit the initial bylaws is “a major abrogation of council’s responsibility to establish the strongest possible ordinance and bylaws that will protect black and brown bodies in our community,” Heinecke says.

Brackney, for her part, has been lukewarm on the CRB in the past. In a 2019 interview with C-VILLE, she said, “I’ve never been able to understand or get a clear answer as to why there was the development of a Civilian Review Board here.”

Now, she says, “I don’t know what the next steps are. I’m not as familiar with the individual members [of the new board] to understand collectively what their work might look like as a team. I would be remiss if I tried to get ahead of that without engaging with that board first.”

And so, two years in, the struggle to translate energy and uprising into tangible change is still ongoing. Beard says the city’s efforts at real post-2017 reform are “a work in progress.”

The rest of the nation seems poised to embark on this journey now, too. This week has galvanized change across the country, and prompted new questions here in Charlottesville, including whether police officers belong in city schools. Will the national uprisings push Charlottesville’s justice reform forward?

“I pray,” says Beard. “I pray hard. It needs to happen. And soon.”



Chief RaShall Brackney
EZE AMOS



SANJAY SUCHAK

Protesters gather by the Monument Avenue statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond.

Goodbye, Lee?

The six-story-tall equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee has towered over Richmond’s Monument Avenue since 1890. Soon, it’ll be gone, replaced by empty sky.

“That statue has been there for a long time. But it was wrong then and it’s wrong now. So we’re taking it down,” said Governor Ralph Northam during a June 4 press conference.

The announcement came after the death of George Floyd sparked ongoing national protests against police brutality. Demonstrators in Richmond have targeted the Lee statue since the protests began, spray painting “Black Lives Matter” and other slogans across its base. When Richmond police tear-gassed peaceful protesters at the site on June 1, the statue became an even more charged symbol of oppression.

Richmonders have re-contextualized other Confederate spots in the city as well—the United Daughters of the Confederacy building, just a few blocks from the Lee statue, was lit on fire on May 31, with the word “Abolition” written next to its steps.

Zyahna Bryant, the Charlottesville student activist who started the petition to remove Charlottesville’s Lee statue in 2016, spoke at Northam’s press conference on Thursday.

“I want to make space to thank the activists in Charlottesville who have put in decades of work to get us to where we are today,” Bryant said. “Without them, we wouldn’t be here.”

Charlottesville, ground zero for the fight over Confederate monuments, could see its statues of Lee and Stonewall Jackson removed later in the summer. This year, the General Assembly finally passed a rule allowing localities to remove their Confederate monuments. The law will go into effect July 1, and then City Council will have to vote on the statues’ removal, hold a public hearing, and offer them to any museums that are interested—a total of 60 days worth of legislative hoops to jump through—before the monuments can legally come down. At an event in March, local activist Don Gathers said he thought it best not to schedule the removal ahead of time, so as to avoid any potential violence.

Richmond’s Lee statue, by contrast, sits on state property, and can be removed

without public comment or review. Northam says the cranes will roll in “as soon as possible” and put the statue in storage.

Of course, dissenters are already coming out of the woodwork—on June 9, a descendant of one of the statue’s original donors sued Northam to keep it in place. A judge then issued an injunction that will prevent the statue’s removal for 10 days. Northam’s spokesperson said in a statement that the governor remains “confident in his authority” to move the statue.

Amanda Chase, the only Republican who has so far announced a 2021 run for governor, called Northam’s decision a “cowardly capitulation to the looters and domestic terrorists” that’s aimed at “appeasing the left-wing mob.” A statement from a collection of Virginia’s Republican state senators said the statue should remain where it is, but called Chase’s statement “idiotic, inappropriate, and inflammatory,” reports WLSL 10 News. (Republicans have not won a statewide election in Virginia since 2009.)

The Lee statue in Richmond is one of five Confederate statues on Monument Avenue. The other four, which Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney said Wednesday he also wants removed, are on land controlled by the city of Richmond. To take down those monuments, Stoney would have to follow the same process that’s required in Charlottesville.

Elsewhere in the country, many Confederate memorials have been torn down informally. People in Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama, have toppled statues during demonstrations, and monuments have been spray-painted and otherwise altered in countless other cities. In Alexandria, Virginia, even the United Daughters of the Confederacy got in on the action, removing a statue of a soldier that it owns from one of Alexandria’s central streets.

“Make no mistake,” Northam said at the press conference, “removing a symbol is important, but it’s only a step.”

“I want to be clear that there will be no healing or reconciliation until we have equity,” Bryant said. “Until we have fully dismantled the systems that oppress black and brown people.”—Ben Hitchcock



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NEWS

Use of Force

Violent arrest of homeless man on Downtown Mall concerns activists

By Ben Hitchcock
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If you can stay off the Downtown Mall and I don't see you again, then I won't take you," said the Charlottesville police officer.

"That's not going to happen," said Christopher Gonzalez, who had been lying on his back on the mall outside CVS. It was 5:30pm on Wednesday, July 8. The sun was shining.

"Why?" The officer asked.

"I'm going to stay living right here," said Gonzalez. He was experiencing homelessness, and had nowhere else to go.

"Then I'm going to take you to jail for drunk in public," the officer responded.

"Well let's go then," Gonzalez said.

The officer turned Gonzalez around and started to put him in handcuffs, but Gonzalez pulled his arm away. Moments later, the officer threw Gonzalez up against the wall of the CVS, kned him in the thigh, and pinned him on the ground in a headlock, where he held him for around 50 seconds.

An Instagram video showing the physical altercation was posted later that evening, and soon after, at the request of multiple community members, the Charlottesville Police Department released 17 minutes of body camera footage recording the lead-up to the incident. The body camera fell off during the scuffle, so the Instagram video is the only available footage of the physical arrest.

A citizen on the mall saw Gonzalez lying down and called 911, says the CPD. The body cam footage shows that a police officer arrived first; then a rescue squad appeared and gave Gonzalez a clean bill of health. The officer dismissed the rescue

squad, and the altercation began. The police department has not released the officer's name because the incident is subject to an "ongoing investigation."

Fortunately, Gonzalez did not appear to suffer any physical injuries. He was charged with felony assault of a police officer, as well as with misdemeanors for public intoxication and obstruction of justice.

The officer's violent arrest of Gonzalez has drawn concern from justice system experts and activists around town.

"I'm a nurse, and I am a researcher, and one of the things that I focus on a lot is strangulation," says Kathryn Laughon, a UVA nurse and an activist with Charlottesville's Defund the Police movement. Laughon says, speaking generally, "use of chokeholds by police—it's unconscionable. There is no safe way to apply pressure to anyone's neck."

"We don't do chokeholds, we don't teach any sort of neck restraints," said Police Chief RaShall Brackney in an interview with Victory Church on June 14.

"[Gonzalez] really didn't assault the officer," says Legal Aid Justice Center community organizer Harold Folley. "He pulled away from the officer, but he didn't assault the officer. It doesn't justify the officer beating his ass like that."

Stephen Hitchcock is the executive director of The Haven, a shelter just a few blocks from where the incident took place.

"We deal with that kind of situation, someone who's intoxicated, every day, all day," says Hitchcock. "And we never have to knee the person, and pummel them, and

Body camera footage released by the police department shows an officer grabbing Christopher Gonzalez, moments before throwing him to the ground.



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then slam them to the ground, ever. We've never had to do that."

"You give someone a bottle of water. It changes their breathing, it builds a connection with them. A little act of trust and generosity," Hitchcock says.

The officer's treatment of Gonzalez fits into a larger pattern of criminalizing poverty and addiction, say these activists. And Black and brown people feel the effect of those practices at a disproportionate rate.

The officer, standing just a few feet from restaurants where affluent patrons drink the night away, offered Gonzalez a deal—leave the mall and we won't arrest you. "A drunk in public—it is against the law," Hitchcock says. "But how many white, wealthy people behind the looping chains [of restaurant patios] are also drunk?"

"To say that, in the city, there are certain places where you can't be drunk in public, but if you move a block away it's not a criminal act—that tells me that this isn't about health and safety," says Laughon.

"So often, you see [UVA] students getting trashed," Folley says, "and the officers assist them, help them to where they need to go... But that's the difference between Black and brown people and white people."

Arresting people who are experiencing health problems or homelessness makes it more difficult for them to get back on their feet, Hitchcock points out. If the felony charge sticks, it will be harder for Gonzalez to find housing and employment.

Activists see this incident as an example of why it's necessary to radically change the way police operate in the city.

"What I see is the importance of a strong Civilian Review Board," says Folley. "The police should not police themselves." (Charlottesville's Police Civilian Review Board has just begun meeting, but it has been entangled in a dispute with City Council over its own bylaws.)

"This is a perfect example of why using armed police to be our first responders to just about every situation is a real problem," says Laughon. "The money that goes into policing, and to then criminalizing behavior, could be better spent on housing, on health care—those are things that would make the community safer and healthier." 🗨️



Lending a hand

Black-owned businesses get some relief

By Brielle Entzminger

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When the pandemic struck, "it was like somebody just snatched a chair from under us," says Jeannetha Brown-Douglas, owner of JBD Event Catering & Soul Food. "It was like having a business one day, and having no business the next day."

Inspired by her grandmother, Brown-Douglas first got into the food industry nearly 30 years ago, when she began working with UVA Dining. She later opened up a fried chicken stand in front of the Sunshine Mini Mart on Cherry Avenue, and it was a hit.

This led her to sign up for business classes at Piedmont Virginia Community College and for a program at the Community Investment Collaborative, which helped her to launch her own catering business.

"We did a lot of catered events and had a lot of contracts with various places in Charlottesville," such as the University of Virginia, she says. "We got our name out there... and got really known."

In 2018, Brown-Douglas was finally able to open her own eatery in Belmont, where customers no longer had to wait for a catered event to enjoy her home-cooked meals. But when COVID rendered large events impossible and forced everyone to stay inside, the shop went quiet.

The pandemic has hammered the economy, and local Black business owners like Brown-Douglas have felt the effects. Not only have many struggled to receive government assistance, but "being a Black-owned business is a challenge in itself," she says.

Thankfully, some relief has arrived. JBD Catering is one of six minority-owned businesses in the Charlottesville area to receive a \$3,000 fully forgivable loan from the Virginia 30 Day Fund's new partnership with the United Way of Greater Charlottesville. These loans are being dispensed after previous government initiatives to keep small businesses afloat have failed—this is the first financial assistance JBD has received.

While the loans don't have to be repaid, awardees are encouraged to "pay it forward," and donate money to the fund when they're back on their feet. That money will be distributed to another struggling small business in Virginia, according to entrepreneur Pete Snyder, who co-founded the Charlottesville-based fund with his wife.

After learning he'd been awarded a loan, Lawrence Johnson, owner of Larry's Barber Shop, breathed a huge sigh of relief. He



MARLEY NICHELLE

Lawrence Johnson, owner of Larry's Barber Shop, plans to use his loan from the Virginia 30 Day Fund to purchase additional sanitation supplies for his business.

hadn't received unemployment benefits, or any other sort of financial relief since shuttering his shop. Instead, he had to use money from his savings to cover his expenses.

Since reopening during the second week of June, business has been "slow but steady," says Johnson. "Some people are still afraid to come out, [especially] the older customers."

Johnson has owned his business, now located on Goodman Street, for the past 10 years.

He plans to use the \$3,000 to pay his bills, and purchase additional sanitation supplies. He'd also like to do more advertising, and hopefully bring in new customers.

"I am very thankful for this opportunity," he says.

Brown-Douglas has also had trouble keeping things going over the past few months. All of her catering gigs were canceled as soon as the pandemic hit, and because her eatery planned on moving, it was difficult to remain open for takeout.

"We had to literally shut down and start from scratch," she says. "But I'm glad for that time, because it gave us a chance to really think about what direction we were going to take our business in."

To help keep the lights on, Brown-Douglas and her daughter, Dejua, who helps run JBD, provided dinners to guests at a Salvation Army shelter, which were paid for by St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

Meanwhile, she applied for a range of grants, but did not have any luck until she received a phone call from Snyder last week.

"It's been a really trying time for us," says Brown-Douglas. "A lot of times, they don't turn you down. They just say they're out of money, or they've had so many applications they had to cut it off at a certain point. With the amount of people, it's just like playing the lottery."

"It really can break your spirit," she adds. "[So] it was just a blessing to have that phone call, and actually feel like somebody cares."

She plans to use the loan to "expand our inventory and safety equipment," which she will need to reopen this month at her new location on Second Street, for both dine-in and takeout.

When it becomes safe to do so, Brown-Douglas will also open up the space for events, such as parties and meetings, which will include on-site catering.

"We do have the ability to do outside seating, and we also have a lot of space [inside] to spread our customers out, so they'll be comfortable and safe at the same time," she says.

Through its partnership with the United Way, the Virginia 30 Day Fund plans to distribute at least \$76,000 more in forgivable loans to minority-owned businesses and early education centers in Charlottesville and Albemarle. 🗨️

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JEANETHA BROWN-DOUGLAS, OWNER OF JBD EVEN CATERING & SOUL FOOD