



NAACP Providence Branch

P.O. Box 5767, Providence, RI 02903 (401) 521-6222 www.naacpprov.org

February 8, 2021

Hon. Stephen Isherwood
Rhode Island District Court
J. Joseph Garrahy Judicial Complex
One Dorrance Plaza
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Dear Judge Isherwood:

The Providence Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) would like to thank the Court for the opportunity to provide this Community Impact Statement regarding a significant case. Our organization has closely followed *State of Rhode Island v. Richard Gordon*. Given the particularly egregious facts of this case, we would like to take this opportunity to share with the Court the reasons why there is an overwhelming need for robust enforcement of Rhode Island's hate crime law.

Hate crimes are not only crimes against individuals, but crimes against the ideals of a diverse and inclusive society. Their harm has a ripple effect. A crime motivated by animus towards an entire class of people deprives every member of that class the opportunity to enjoy the rights and privileges of American citizens. The truth is that in some people's eyes people of color or of different national origins are never viewed or accepted as true Americans. They are made to feel as though they are strangers in their own land and that they do not belong here. Hate crime laws affirm our society's commitment to the principle that all men are created equal and deter those who wish to undermine our founding ideals.

The defendant's use of the "N" word against Bahram Pahlavi during the attack is reflective of his bigotry towards him and an entire class of people. The "N" word has a long and painful history. Dating back hundreds of years, it was originally used as a pejorative term for slaves of African descent and has persisted as a verbal weapon to strip the humanity of whomever it is directed at. The word is weighty and powerful and harkens back to a time when whites could do whatever they wanted to Blacks or anyone else of color, call them any name, beat them, rape them and even kill them with impunity. In this sense, Richard Gordon used the term to dehumanize Mr. Pahlavi and inform his victim that he held him in contempt as a lesser-than. The use of this term indicated to Mr. Pahlavi, the African-American community, and other communities of color, that Richard Gordon holds them all in the same contempt.



NAACP Providence Branch

P.O. Box 5767, Providence, RI 02903 (401) 521-6222 www.naacpprov.org

His invective not only dehumanizes Mr. Pahlavi but people of color everywhere. The use of the term – along with Gordon’s later use of the slur “raghead” – shows that the defendant’s reason for attacking Mr. Pahlavi in the first place was racial animus and prejudice towards him and people of color.

Another very troubling aspect of this case was the Defendant’s attempt to use law enforcement against the victim. It is both disheartening and unsurprising that he would attempt to do so. As we have seen time and time again, perpetrators of bigoted violence use privilege to turn the criminal justice system against people of color and persecute the victims. This is particularly disturbing given this time of civil unrest and the existing tension between communities of color and law enforcement. We are fortunate that the system rightly identified the victim and offender in this case, but we must be vigilant against attempts by bigots to hijack our system of justice for their own sinister ends.

While Rhode Island has come a long way since it served as a slave-trading hub, and strides have been made towards racial equality, crimes like those of Richard Gordon remind us that prejudice and racism are not a thing of the past. We must continue the fight against violence motivated by bigotry and racial hatred and seek equality in all areas. Through the just application of the State’s hate crime law in this case and all deserving cases, our society can send the correct message: racist and bigoted behavior has consequences.

The NAACP Providence Branch thanks the Court for the opportunity to provide this Community Impact Statement.

Sincerely,

Jim Vincent, President

NAACP Providence Branch